THE MAGAZINE O

# Fantasy AND Science Fiction

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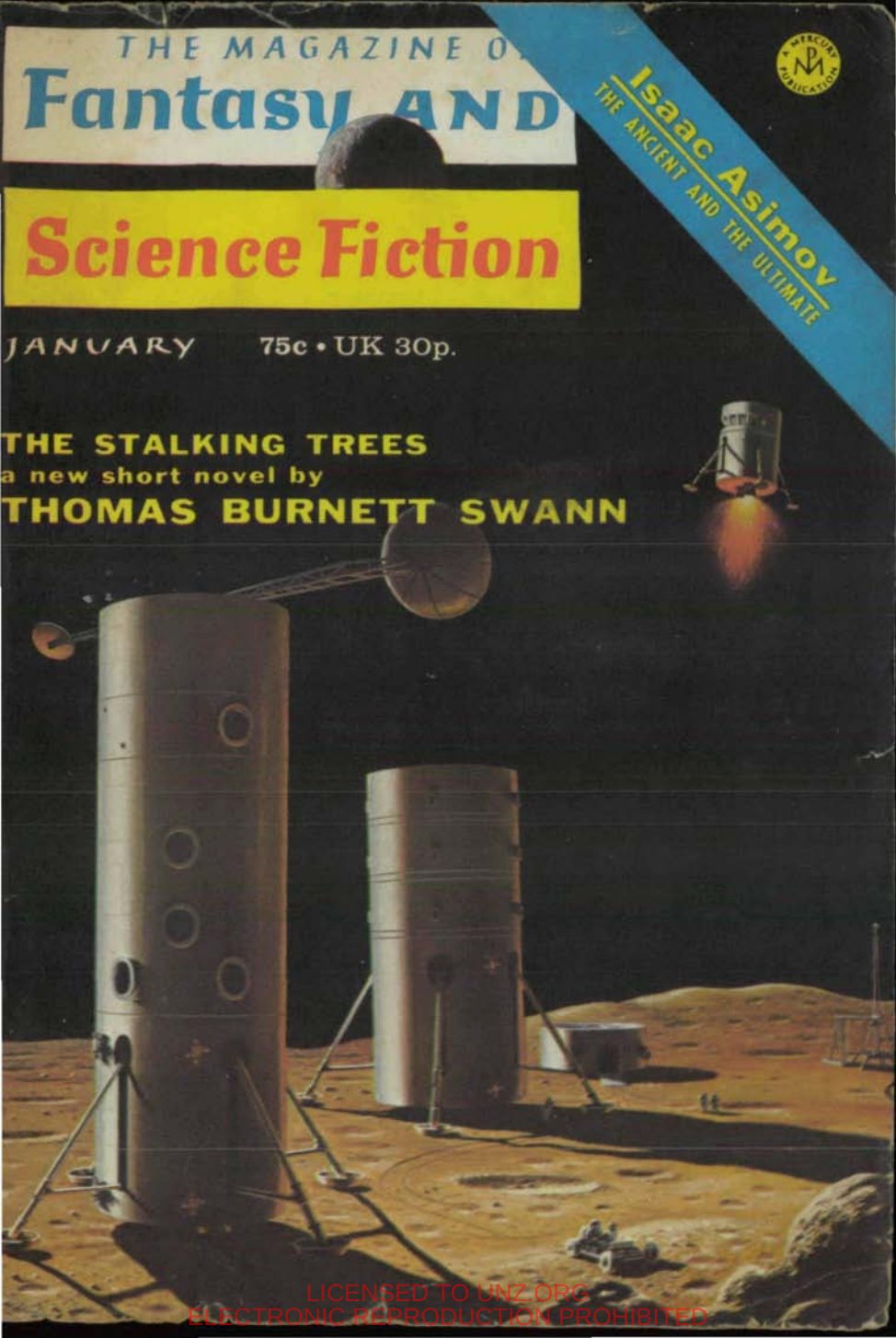
Isaac Asimov
THE ANCIENT AND THE ULTIMATE

A MERCURY PUBLICATION

THE STALKING TREES
a new short novel by
THOMAS BURNETT SWANN



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# Fantasy and Science Fiction

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JANUARY • 24th YEAR OF PUBLICATION



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As most of our regular readers know by now, Thomas Burnett Swann is a fine storyteller with a unique ability to bring history to life by injecting healthy doses of legend and fantasy. Here is Dr. Swann with a shorter than usual, but no less delightful tale about the adventures of a Saxon serf and the son of a Norman baron.

# The Stalking Trees

## by THOMAS BURNETT SWANN

IF STEPHEN HAD BEEN A conquering Norman instead of a conquered Saxon, a freeman instead of a serf, he might have hoped to become a knight and Crusader, since he fought well, even if with a stave instead of a sword; or a troubadour who sang his way to the Holy Land, since he sang well, composed songs in his mind, and played the rebec. But he was the son of a Saxon father who was also a villein or serf, and one whose ears had been cropped when he had unintentionally sent a sick lamb to his liege lord, Ralph the Falcon, and caused that redoubtable baron severe cramps in the stomach.

Life was harsh in other ways, and not only for Stephen. Even as the wolves retreated into the heart of that pathless forest, the Heath, the Mandrakes throve and multiplied and dared to pass their girl babies—always girls, for the boys were recognizable even in infancy—into the households of human men and women. His father had told him about the first such instance, in the reign of Richard the Lion-Heart. A woodcutter and his wife had returned from market to find a tiny girl in their cradle. A fairy changeling, they thought, and everyone knew that to reject a changeling invited disaster. In this particular corner of southern England, the fairy folk were tall as a man, fierce as a manticore, and quick to take vengeance with a fire or a whirlwind or an outright murder. At first the couple rejoiced that no child was stolen in place of the



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arrival; in fact, they had recently lost a child to the wasting sickness, and it was as if the senders had known of an empty cradle and an empty heart.

She grew, pretty as an apple blossom, to young womanhood; her parents declined and finally died of a nameless fever. The girl, alone now in the house, began a gradual but grisly disintegration. Her skin seemed to shrivel; hair grew profusely over her body, and no food satisfied her insatiable appetite. It was pathetic to see her vainly trying to retain her beauty with comb and rouge and staring sadly into a bronze mirror (for who but the rich could afford the rare glass mirrors found in the Holy Land?). Furthermore, she genuinely grieved for her dead foster parents and did not seem to realize that she herself might have caused their deaths. Of course she was finally recognized as a Mandrake and burned at the stake. But there were other incidents in other villages, and the country folk devised a cruel but necessary test for suspect girls. They pierced the flesh of an arm or leg, and if her blood was thick and viscous like resin—for in many ways the Mandrankes were more akin to vegetables than to men—they promptly severed her head or burned her at the stake. The expression arose, "Sooner a wolf than a Mandrake." There were regular Mandrake hunts with horses and dogs, though a unicorn, the implacable natural enemy of the creature, was the best guide. Slaughtered Mandrakes were dried and dissected and sold as aphrodisiacs.

Stephen, big, ruddy, blond, handsome enough to turn the head of a Saracen princess—Stephen, who would never need an aphrodisiac—saw his first Mandrake when he was fifteen. Yearly a fair was held in the castle bailey under the protection of the baron, and Stephen had been sent by his parents to buy lentils and wool and, most important, said his father, a pinch of nard from the Holy Land, for his mother was the cleanliest, sweetest, prettiest villein's wife in all the village.

Temporary stalls were raised in the shadow of the keep, merchants came from Chichester, the nearest large town, the products ranged from vegetables and animals to spoils from the Holy Land. Little wealth remained in England, what with the Crusades and the ransom of the late, beloved Richard the Lion-Heart, but this was a day to spend. There were silver-tongued charlatans, occasional thieves, but mostly knights and villeins mingling, for once, almost as happy equals. And there was young

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John, only son to Ralph the Falcon, standing inside the door to the great keep, too shy to emerge and mix in the crowd, too curious to remain with his scrolls and codices. Stephen nodded to him, and John, uncertain at first if the greeting were meant for him, responded with a slow, shy smile.

Inwardly rejoicing over John's belated but undeniable response, Stephen happened upon a small group of people engaged in heated argument; a man, his wife, and their little girl and the couple who lived in the cottage nearest to them.

"Too plump and rosy by far," Michael the neighbor was saying. "It never struck me so much as today. I think you've got a Mandrake on your hands, and she's a threat to us all. Thought so for some time but kept still out of liking for you." Dislike flickered in his porcine eyes. He was a fat, swarthy man with warts on his nose. "Ever give her the test?"

"No," snapped Timothy. "Everybody within twenty miles knows the fairy folk—the kindly ones—brought her as a gift when we lost our own child. Who are we to question providence? Kept my wife from losing her mind, she did. 'Sides, she's too biddable to be a Mandrake. Most of their girls are hot-tempered even as babes. Always crying and wanting and peering in a looking glass. Look at me and Leah. Are we peaked?"

"They don't always stay at home," said Rachel, who was Michael's wife and the one woman who appeared not to mind his petulance and his warts. "Why your Rebecca spends half her time with my little Sarah and looks twice as plump. Sarah's ailing even today. We couldn't bring her to the fair." Rachel herself, unlike her husband, looked as if she might have been prey to a Mandrake. "And you lost your child not a month before this one came."

"To the plague."

"Know for sure? Never had any sores." A knowing smile wrinkled her face.

"Too her too fast."

"I say put her to the test," said Michael. He brandished a wicked blade, more scimitar than knife, booty from a Crusade. By now a crowd had gathered to watch the fracas. A three-legged pig grunted for attention. Fine round cheeses attracted mongrels instead of men. Women shouted their wares in vain. Most of the crowd liked a show, even a cruel show, and would make a holiday out of a hanging.

It was here that Stephen entered the fray. He had never seen a Mandrake girl, but he knew that this piquant child

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could not be so loathsome a creature. Golden Stephen who had lain with half the girls in the village and somehow remained their friends. Gold as a Phoenix, golden hairs on his legs beneath his tunic, hair in an unearned halo on his head.

"Cut that child and I'll break your arm," he said. Michael scowled and appeared to gauge Stephen's height and girth.

"Who's this talking? The biggest womanizer in the town flies to defend a Mandrake. Waiting till she's old enough to share your couch?"

"I'll be on a Crusade when she's old enough to wed," he snapped.

Michael averted his eyes, seized his wife by the arm, and lost himself in the crowd.

All this time the child had stared at the contestants with growing bewilderment. Four years old, the prettiest child in the village, she was used to compliments and caresses, not to angry or suspicious stares. A wonder of red-gold hair and rosebud lips, she ran into Stephen's arms. He had often played Hoodman Blind with her. He liked her as he liked most children and indeed most people, except for the Michaels and the ear-cropping barons of the world.

Her grateful parents thanked him with a flow of words and an invitation.

"You must eat with us," they said almost in the same breath. Timothy and Leah, though not old, both walked with canes, and they hobbled toward him to express their gratitude.

Stephen gratefully accepted the invitation. His appetite was prodigious, and he had only brought an apple and a slab of cheese on wheaten bread for his lunch, since his parents were poor even for villeins, too poor to spare the time to attend the fair.

But the crowd, though pretending to disburse, was still covertly interested, and the child was the center of many stares. The three-legged pig attracted a buyer; a glass mirror was eagerly passed among the ladies. But still—the covert stares.

"We'll lunch outside the walls," Timothy suggested. Ralph the Falcon was temporarily at peace with the neighboring barons, and most of the wolves had been driven deep into the Heath. Even the adult Mandrakes kept their distance from the castle.

In the shadow of the great black keep which gave the castle the name of Tortoise, they spread their simple but nourishing fare on a daffodiled meadow: a pork pie which made Stephen's mouth water even though it was cold and a

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generous hogshead of beer. After lunch they stretched on the grass for a nap. Faraway voices faded in the mist of Stephen's contentment. He was wonderfully relaxed because he had helped to spare the child a dreadful test and because he had eaten well with good and grateful companions and was to be allowed that rarest of luxuries, a nap in the middle of the day.

He slept and dreamed that the Saxons had never been conquered by the Normans—that he was a knight like his great-great-grandfather, instead of a Saxon villein under a Norman overlord. When he woke, Rebecca—such a soft and pretty thing—had nestled like a puppy beside him, her head on his shoulder. He saw that she was awake and tried to get to his feet. Naps, though permitted at the fair, were expected to be brief. He must get home with his lentils and wool, and with the previous pinch of nard for his mother, which had cost his father a dozen chickens. Unaccountably, at first he could not rise. A strange lassitude pervaded his sturdy frame, like the aftermath of a fever; his throat stung as if from a hornet's sting. There was no blood, but the stinging was slow to subside, and he remembered that Mandrakes never pierced the skin like the vampires of Hungary whom the Crusaders had encountered; they drew blood through pores, often meaning to kiss instead of vampirize the victim. For Mandrake girls reared by human families were not the fierce, ravening creatures of the forest.

Rebecca's parents were still remote in sleep, their faces pale and drawn but contented. Finally he managed to stand, and Rebecca looked at him with adoring eyes.

"Big Stephen," she said in a voice as sweet as a wind chime. There was adoration in the way she said his name. She probably thought that she had only kissed him, the big blond boy who had saved her from that terrible knife.

What must he do? She was a threat to the village, including his own parents.

Someone else was staring at him. It was Michael. His porcine eyes glittered with triumph.

"You still think we shouldn't put her to the test?" asked the miller in a voice of studied calm.

"What—what do you mean?" It was rare for confident Stephen to stammer.

The market was dispersing, the sun was sinking toward the oaks and elms and sycamores which reminded a man that England, though a great kingdom, was still largely a wilderness. People were milling

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past them on their way to their houses in the village. Women in hooded gowns, men in knee-length tunics and long stockings of chauses. Men and women old before their time from their toils and their griefs. Only the young glittered through the drab garb with the fires of youth.

"Look," cried Michael. "Did you ever see Stephen when he wasn't ready to wrestle a bear?"

"He looks as if the bear had won," suggested a neighbor.

Stephen was not ready to wrestle a bear, or even Michael. He fell to his knees, then rose unsteadily to sway on his feet.

People were gathering round him now as if he were a three—no, a two-legged pig.

Michael, sure of his evidence, snatched the child from the ground. She gave a yelp of terror. Stephen tried to resist her attacker, but a mere push sent him to the ground.

Michael performed the test with his rusty crooked knife. By this time Rebecca's parents were awake and shouting and even trying to take the knife from Michael's hand, but there were neighbors to restrain them. Into the girl's arm went the blade, deep, deep. She looked bewildered beyond mere physical pain. She did not utter a cry.

There was no blood, there was an oozing of a viscous, greenish liquid.

The test was conclusive even to Stephen.

Michael bristled with triumph.

"Burn her," shouted his wife.

The cries resounded and multiplied.

"It's easier this way," Michael said, and neatly severed her head. Her veins and arteries looked like roots.

Stephen vomited violently and fell to the ground with a terrible cramp in his stomach.

He was late getting home with his lentils and wool and nard. His father had come from the fields, and his mother was waiting anxiously at the door. Their cabin lay a few hundred paces from the village, which in Saxon times had been large and prosperous. The intervening houses had been burned by a band of knights during the Norman Conquest, and trees and sedges had grown in their place. He had stopped several times to retch and his eyes were red with tears. He was the kind of boy who could cry and no one would dare to call him womanish.

"There are still some wolves about," his mother reminded him. "I was worried about you. And how pale you look!" Only her hands looked hard and calloused. A baron's wife might have envied the rest of her, the

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grace of her body, the fine, small bones of her face, the beauty which does not age. She might have stepped from the lordly wooden hall of her ancestors.

She always smelled of clover or bergamot. There were some who whispered that, once as a girl, she had met a unicorn in the forest and learned the secret of perpetual youth. She was called the Lady of the Daffodils by those who loved her. Her one vanity was never to wear a hood which concealed her extravagance of yellow hair.

Stephen embraced her with an urgent tenderness.

"A Mandrake," he said. "At the fair—"

"How horrible."

"No, no mother, you don't understand. She was just a little girl. It was Rebecca."

He recounted the tale.

"Perhaps the child is better dead," his mother said, though tears shone in her eyes. She, like Stephen, had often played with Rebecca.

"Why couldn't they have put her in the forest for her own people to find?"

"That's what you or I would have done," said his mother, but his father interrupted them.

"To grow up and mate with a Mandrake and give us more enemies?" After the mating, the female Mandrake was thought to give birth to a round melonlike object which she planted in the ground. When it grew into the semblance of a human baby, she disinterred it and took it with her into a warren, where no man dared to pursue her. "Heaven knows, with wolves, Mandrakes, brigands, and contentious barons, we have enough to fight; no, Stephen, they were right. They had to be cruel in order to be kind. Everyone knows that the worst death is burning. The beheading was quick and painless. She never felt a thing. I'm proud of the way you stood up for her, though, till it was sure what she was."

It was hard to believe that his father had once been the handsomest boy in the village. His cropped ears made his head look long and thin, like the hilt of a sword, and he was scarred and leathery like an old saddle from toiling at many tasks in many weathers. But he was not embittered, nor even wry, and Stephen loved him as much as he despised the baron.

Stephen excused himself from the one-room cottage with the announcement that he had to feed his dog, Bucephalus. Someone had told him the name had belonged to a horse ridden by his great hero of antiquity, Alexander the Great, dreamer and conqueror; and with a prayer to Alexander, who was a very real saint to

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him, he had borrowed it for his dog. He settled behind the cottage under a lean-to and took the dog, a large one-eyed mongrel, into his arms, for he was a boy who liked to touch those he loved. He was much more eloquent with gestures than with words and needful of them in return.

He tried to efface the memory of the girl's death. I will think of the gentlest person I know besides my mother, he thought, and he thought of John, son of his liege lord, and felt a leap of affection for the motherless lad whose father wanted him to become a great warrior but who seemed destined for scholarship or the church. The two had never spoken to each other, but he had heard about John's trip to Normandy with his father and mentally accompanied him, and he sometimes pretended that they were brothers enroute to the Holy Land on the Children's Crusade led by Nicholas of Germany.

It never occurred to that practical dreamer, Stephen, that John and the Mandrakes and also a grave-eyed, fierce-horned unicorn would soon become a part of his life as well as his dreams and nightmares.

## CHAPTER II

It was the week following the fair. The memory of Rebecca, the grotesquerie of her death, sometimes stalked his dreams and awakened him in the night, but there was too much work to allow him to brood in the day. The villagers worked the three-field system—one field for wheat, one for oats, one to lie fallow—and his father was sewing oats on the meager five acres he held in the name of the baron, who held them in the name of King John. With a family to feed from so little land, his father would soon be using a cane like Timothy.

Stephen himself had helped in the fields almost till sundown, his special duty to fling stones at greedy crows and preserve the newly sewn seeds with a handsling. Beyond some gentle green hillocks, the cattle had grazed in the common land; vineyards, still grapeless, already attracted bees. A tranquil scene, but harsh to Stephen, who knew how little was left for his parents when they had paid their mill dues and market dues and delivered a third of their crop to the baron. After sewing would come the weeding, the harvesting, the stacking and the flailing, with only a different girl, loved in secret, to tell him that it was another year. Would Miriam, grave, silent Miriam, the latest girl he visited under the stars, never

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permit him a greater liberty than holding her hand?

Late in the afternoon, he returned ahead of his father to help his mother, who somehow managed to look as bright and fresh as a daffodil even in a gown of gray homespun. He wished that he had thought to bring her a wreath of the flowers to garland her hair. The little house with its one real room, its one window in the gabled loft, its sparse furnishings of table and benches, earthenware mugs and wooden chest with a rounded top, seemed hardly large enough for a single man, much less his family, but his mother Joanna kept it as spotless as the solar in a great manor house.

Faraway sounds came from the other cottages—was that the evening Angelus ringing in the castle?—but the trees shut them into their own isolation of endless toil, endless days divided between the fields and their one-room thatched cottage, endless cheeses and porridges and wheaten bread, and never a savory eel like those from the baron's table, or the sweet succulence of venison, since only the baron and his knights could hunt for deer.

"Damn, damn, damn," muttered Stephen under his breath, and then, the coarsest oath he knew. "God's bowels. Will there never be an end to work, work, work? Will I never get to fight in the Holy Land, or even learn to use a sword?" Why, in France another Stephen, almost his age, was marching to join Nicholas in the Children's Crusade. By now they must be nearing the port of Outre-Mere. When they were battling Saracens, he would doubtless be splitting firewood.

"Enough work for one day," said his mother, as if she had read his thoughts—at times he thought that she truly had such a power, learned from the unicorns. "Boys weren't meant to work as long as their fathers. That time will come soon enough. You were meant to be a happy boy, Stephen, but poverty gets in the way. Why don't you go into the village before it gets dark and have a game of knucklebones with your friends?"

Not every boy worked as hard as Stephen; not all parents were as poor as his own, whose levies to the baron had been almost doubled—in crops, not meat—after the unfortunate incident of the lamb which had poisoned the baron. His mother drew him to her and whispered a kiss across his cheek.

"I wish better things for you in the future. Lives do change, you know."

"Did you really meet a unicorn when you were a girl?" he blurted. It was a question he

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had often asked without receiving an answer.

She gave him an indulgent smile. "That must be my secret. If I did meet one, I would have had to promise not to tell, wouldn't I?"

"Some people meet them and tell."

"Ah, but mine would have been a special meeting, if the stories they tell are true, wouldn't it now?"

"But you can tell me what they're like. You've read about them in a bestiary." His parents were both literate; he had promised himself to follow their example, but he had scarcely begun his journey. Who could study by candlelight when there were girls to meet?

"The monks say they symbolize the human soul. Their horns point eternally toward the heavens. Yet here on earth, like all good folk, they have their enemies, the Mandrakes, who symbolize bodily desires, the baser things of this earth." She always talked about unicorns as if they were people, and indeed an old tradition, older than the Norman Conquest, held that truly good people when they died were sometimes allowed to linger on earth for another life as unicorns to protect the ones they loved.

He liked to hear her talk on the subject.

"And what do they look like?"

"Their fur is as gossamer as a butterfly's wing. Their horns are mother-of-pearl. And they run like the wind, though not out of fear but because they feel that if they run fast enough, they will fly right up into the heavens."

"I've never seen one," he said sadly. "I've taken the swine to root in the forest. I've cut firewood. Once I walked all the way to Chichester to get you that camphor the time you were sick. Not a unicorn on the way."

She patted him gently on the hand. "Young boys have naughty thoughts sometimes. It's their nature. The unicorns hesitate to show themselves. They may have watched over you, though. Now if you had had a virgin with you—"

"Like you were when you saw your unicorn."

"Ah, Stephen, Stephen, you will get me to break my promise." She was washing clothes in a tub with a lye made of wood ashes, but she paused and a distance came into her eyes, as if she had glimpsed her own Jerusalem.

"If you didn't meet one, I don't see how you can be so old and yet so pretty." (She was thirty-five.) "Well, I would like to look for one in spite of my naughty thoughts. Maybe he

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could lead me to the Holy Land."

"No," she said firmly. "They only lead men to Mandrakes, not Infidels, and it's a good thing too. The Holy Land resisted King Richard. What might it do to you?"

"Richard would have won if he hadn't been deserted by his allies. All it takes is the right support, and Jerusalem will fall in our hands like a ripe fig."

"The fig is protected by many bees, I fear. And who will you get for allies? The children of France and Germany?"

"And England. I could lead those—with the help of a unicorn."

"No," she said with a firmness which in her amounted to an unarguable prohibition. "If he led you anywhere, it would be right back to your home, poor though it is."

"Well, he might make me better looking." He was genuinely unaware that his beauty, in its masculine way, equaled that of his mother. If she was a daffodil, he was a golden fleece.

"As for looks, you've more than enough as it is. Too much for your own good. Or the good of our local girls."

Best to change the subject. His mother knew of his nocturnal sallies, though she had never tried to stop them. He could think of little she did not know. It was not hard to believe that one of her ancestors had been a Saxon queen.

"If you're not going to play knucklebones, you can churn the milk for me."

Later, he was glad that he had stayed with her.

It was night. Most of the cottagers had fallen into the dreamless sleep of the overweary and the overworked.

Stephen was tired too, but Miriam stood tall and white as an ivory Madonna in the moonlight. She was exactly his age, but she seemed like an older sister to him. There was a quiet dignity about her soft brown Norman hair—for Normans could also be villeins—and her eyes which never seemed to blink and slightly disconcerted him with their wise stares, as if she had already accepted the fact that she must marry a serf and work until her grave beauty had withered into the grave. She was someone with whom you could share silences as well as conversation. Stephen had begun to pursue her as he had successfully pursued numberless other girls, but the first and only time he had kissed her, she had drawn apart from him and said, gently chiding:

"Boys and girls can be friends, you know, without making love."

At later meetings he had

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sometimes held her hand, but he had ceased to hope for greater intimacies and begun to content himself with her rare friendship. When she did talk, it was quietly, sensibly, about a codex owned by her family, *A History of the Kings of Britain*, and how she had learned to read, and villeins might become freemen, and Saxons ought to be treated as equals, as in most other parts of England; and especially about the Crusades, and how she would like to join the Children's Crusade and visit the Holy Land and fight with whatever weapon the Lord put into her hands.

Tonight they were talking about the male unicorn which had been glimpsed by a young girl in a part of the forest near the village. They sat under an elm tree, and her voice was low and serious, as musical as the wind rustling in the treetop. It was always dangerous to be abroad at night, even a few paces from the village, but somehow this elm seemed a guardian tree, perhaps the metamorphosed Merlin standing guard above them.

"Your mother would know why he came. She's talked with the unicorns, hasn't she?"

"She won't tell me."

"Can't tell you. But she's shown you. You've noticed how calm she is? How she isn't wrinkled like the other women that old—thirty-five, isn't she?"

"Where there are unicorns, there are usually Mandrakes," Stephen said. "I wouldn't want to meet one of *them* in the forest." "You don't exactly meet them. They happen upon you and smother or choke you to death."

"It works both ways. You could say Michael happened on little Rebecca. Sometimes I wonder what's the answer."

"Sometimes there's only a question and you shouldn't look for an answer. I must go now, Stephen. It's late and we both need some sleep."

They rose and she kissed him lightly on the cheek. He recognized a sisterly kiss and did not feel emboldened to make advances.

They returned their separate ways to their cottages. They would not be seen together companioned only by the night. People would mistake them for lovers. Not that Miriam was fearful of her good name. She always said, "I intend to behave, and if people think I'm bad, that's their fault, not mine." But he knew the cruelty of the village folk, including her own parents, and he knew his reputation as a rogue with the girls.

As he neared his cottage, he heard Bucephalus' frenzied yelps.

Buchephalus had to be

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chained at night because he liked to roam and had killed some of fat Michael's chickens and bitten Michael's thin wife on the calf. When Bucephalus barked after dark, it usually meant that he was lonely for his master. Skirting the front and only door—and quite forgetting that he had left it unbarred when he went to see Miriam—Stephen walked immediately to the lean-to at the rear of the cottage.

"There, old fellow, I'm with you now. We'll just have to make the best of each other. There aren't any females on hand."

But the animal's barks redoubled and rose to earsplitting clamor. They did not betoken loneliness. They were angry barks, a plea to be released and allowed to defend his master's family. Otherwise, they would now have subsided into a low, pleased moan of contentment.

An intruder perhaps? A cutpurse? He unloosed the dog and ran after him around the house to the door.

There was something in the house. Three men, it seemed in the lanternless, moonlit room, hunched and stooped but still on two legs. He was so surprised that when the figures made a rush to escape, he stumbled out of their way and Bucephalus reared in surprise like a skittish colt. It was less the force of their slimy bodies than their high, shrill keening, which made him hurl his hands to his ears and hurled him in turn from their path.

There, there in the moonlight he glimpsed the back of their heads, their bodies. Walking trees, a horror of writhing tendrils, limbs like flailing branches. But they lacked even the naturalness of trees. They were a distortion, it seemed to him, a perversion, with the human element in them compounding the horror. People laughed at the London fairs when the apes mimicked men. It was not amusing to see a tree mimic a man. No, they were worse than man-trees. With their deathly pallor, they resembled long-buried corpses dug from their graves with roots still clinging to them.

Mandrakes.

Hastily he lit a lantern. His first thought was to give chase with Bucephalus. But he must see to his parents. Slimy footprints covered the floor. His father was motionless on his bed, his head strangely awry. His mother made him think of a daffodil which someone had trodden with a heavy boot. Her face, though bloodless, was still beautiful, but an arm hung crookedly at her side.

It was lucky for him that first the dog, then the keening

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Mandrakes, had aroused some neighbors beyond the trees. Weaponless, he would have followed the Mandrakes, he and his dog—was he not responsible for leaving the door unbarred?—and doubtless fallen prey to them. Now he fought the men who tried to restrain him. Finally they had to force an opiate down his throat—thick, black, and bitter—"It doesn't do to chase Mandrakes in the dark, lad," someone said—and he slid into a dream-haunted sleep. . . .

When he climbed the stairs of consciousness, the men were deciding what to do with the house, and with him.

"The house can go for firewood," Ralph the Falcon was saying. "It isn't fit for anything else. And I doubt anyone would care to live here even if it were. Too isolated."

"They must have come for revenge because of that child who was killed at the festival," said the knight beside him, a man with a cleft in his chin which he had proudly earned from a Saracen blade. "Chose the one outlying cottage."

"And the boy?"

"The boy?" said the baron abstractedly. He was flushed from drink, foully odorous beneath his fur-lined surcoat and in his pointed shoes which buttoned at the ankle. "What's he good for?"

"He's good with animals," someone suggested.

"I need a dog boy. He can tend my hounds. The last boy fell asleep once too often. I had to take steps."

Stephen was about to blurt, "But I don't like you. I won't even serve your dogs. I couldn't stand to see you kick them after a bad hunt." It would have lost him his ears.

Fortunately for his future, he saw his mother's body, the wrenched arm covered with one of her own three gowns—she had called it her festival gown and worn it at Michaelmas. Some blood had returned to her face, but the closed eyes were too much for him. His words disintegrated into sobs.

"When he's more coherent, bring him to the castle," said Ralph, and, together with two particularly sullen-looking knights, wheeled in his steps and left the village. No doubt he was late for a hunt. It was his one pleasure now that he was not engaged in a war.

Suddenly Stephen felt a shy hand on his arm and looked, incredibly, into the eyes of John, who must have been standing in the shadows during the discussion, unseen by his father.

Silently, impulsively, John hugged him.

Stephen felt the child's thin little bones, the slight strength

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forcefully exerted, and thought what enormous sympathy had led him to conquer his shyness and risk his father's wrath. He returned the embrace, sobbing without shame.

"Cry, Stephen," the boy was saying. "Cry all you like."

It seemed to him that he must have cried for that eternity of Hell about which the castle chaplain liked to warn, but John never wavered in his embrace, though the others gradually moved from the scene, carrying the two bodies with them. Stephen was still too incoherent to shout: Put daffodils on her body. And my father—hide his ears, will you? He was always embarrassed by them.

Suddenly he was emptied of tears and felt the need for words. John took his hand and led him around the village to a mossy seat under a giant sycamore. Stephen had sometimes used the spot for other purposes.

"When my father has me bladed, I come here. It's the only place soft enough to sit. I've seen you pass but you didn't see me. I didn't think you would ever notice me till the fair. Then you smiled. That's why I came today."

"I noticed you a long time before then." Stephen was surprised that he could talk. "When—when your own mother died, and you were just a little boy, I wanted to comfort you. But you were the baron's son. I didn't dare even speak."

"I know. Father might have been angry. I sleep in the great hall with the sons of the knights, and I'm supposed to be friends only with them. I'm not friends with any of them, though. Father will be angry if he learns I've been with you, except that he's going on a hunt and may not miss me. I don't care, even if he catches me. Wasn't it time we became friends?"

"Oh, yes."

"You can teach me how to fight with a stave or a knife. I'm terrible at such things. And I can teach you about—what do you want to learn about?"

"What you saw in Normandy."

"About Normandy then. I want to say something first."

"What is it, John?" It was the first time he spoke the name.

"Will we always be friends?"

"Always."

"Your mother was the prettiest lady in the village. And the sweetest. Everybody said so. When my own mother died, I used to pretend that yours had adopted me. Then I could have had both of you for my family."

Stephen felt a new surge of tears.

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"Go ahead and cry. I cried steadily for six or seven days, they say, and didn't eat a thing. All I remember is that it always seemed to be raining. But it wasn't raining at all. It was the gray kind of way I looked at things."

"And you got over your mother?"

"Oh, no. I didn't have to. I just got used to getting up in the morning and studying with the chaplain and forgetting for little moments and remembering happily sometimes. I was a little boy when she died, but there were so many things to remember. For example, she hated jewelry but she loved flowers. She would wear a crown of larkspur to a feast day, and my father would fume, 'What about your jewels? I brought them all the way from the Holy Land.' I think she was like your mother, except she lived in a castle. Now I had better take you to my father's kennels."

The best dogs were at the hunt. The runts, the pregnant females, the pups were at home and clamorous for attention. They took to Stephen at once and almost dragged him to the ground. He spoke to them softly but firmly, and they stood back from him, obedient, yet even more adoring.

"I'm afraid you'll have to sleep in the hay with them. You'll smell of dog and everybody will forget your name and call you the Dog Boy. Except me, of course."

"Can I bring Bucephalus to live here?"

"Oh, no, he's only a mongrel. Father breeds greyhounds."

"I guess he considers Saxons a bit like mongrels."

"I don't. Your blood is purer than mine, and I've always envied your yellow hair. Maybe you can give your dog to somebody in the village."

"And still slip off to see him at night!"

"I'll bribe the gatekeeper not to tell my father when you come and go. If a dog gets sick, though, you'll get the blame, and probably a good cuffing to boot."

"I don't care. I love them already."

"I knew you would. And you know something else? You'll live inside the walls. And I can come to see you every time my father leaves the castle."

Stephen was not one to think about learning truths. The very word "lesson" sent him into a daydream. But that was the day he learned that sometimes, just sometimes, when we suffer a great loss, we think that we are going to die, we want to die, but God or one of his saints sends us a surprise

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and we want to live. It was then that he began to love, irrevocably and purely, the shy, thin child named John. There would be girls, many of them. There would be friends among the village boys, many of them, and of course there were his dogs, who were like people to him, but from that day John would always be first.

He was inclined to thank his Saint Alexander, who had also had a beloved friend, Hephaistion.

He must not, however, forget his mission: *To kill the Mandrakes that had killed his parents.*

## CHAPTER III

His life in the Black Tortoise was no more difficult than it had been in his own house, which, true to the baron's word, was dismantled to supply the great hearth in the castle hall with firewood for the winter. He slept on a bed of straw in a loft above the kennels, but when a dog, injured in the hunt, moaned or yelped in pain, he jumped the length of the ladder and took the animal in his arms and soothed him into sleep. He examined the refuse from the castle kitchen and, breaking the big bones into manageable size, discarding that which was tainted or tough, selected only those morsels which would not choke his four-legged wards.

Of course he was never invited to join a hunt even as an attendant, but whenever he saw the baron, affixed to his horse as if he were the human portion of a centaur, he brought the best dogs to accompany him, sleek and curried and hungry but not ravenous, so that they would pursue the beasts of the chase, buck and doe and fox, with suitable zest but not devour them before the baron could dismount, set his foot on the quarry, withdraw his arrow, and order the animal returned to the castle. The dogs without exception loved him; the baron and the knights generally ignored him, which meant, assured John, that they considered him an excellent dog boy, since his predecessor had received almost daily cuffings or reduced rations. One morning, before a hunt, the baron said to him: "The dogs are looking well." Stephen had received his first and last compliment.

John joined him when the baron was hunting or visiting a friend at the neighboring castle of the Boar. Trim, if skinny, in a green tunic which reached to his knees, hair worn longer than that of a villein, neatly covering his ears, and black as the wing of a merle, he generally walked with downcast eyes but raised

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his face whenever he greeted Stephen and seemed suffused in a glow of candlelight. Contrary to the custom of the age, and much to the shame of his father, he bathed frequently from a laver and ewer and walked in a redolence as of grass and columbine.

John too had a way with dogs, and he helped Stephen to feed or curry them and, when there was no task at hand, kept him company. Perhaps they discussed Mandrakes or griffins or manticores. Perhaps they quietly chuckled over a shared joke: for example, the odor, not in the least grasslike, of a certain knight, the fat one called Richard, who boasted that he had never taken a bath and reeked of the *garderobe* or lavatory where he hung his fur robes to keep them from moths.

It was a continual pleasure to have the child beside him, and he would not have regretted his life except that his parents were rarely out of his mind, and sometimes the dogs had to comfort *him*. Sometimes the tall square keep, with its four turrets and its low forebuilding, their stones blackened by time and siege fires, bristled above him like a huge griffin, and he yearned for the tiny cottage and wondered why he had ever complained of too much work and too little play. The animals seemed to sense his sieges of despair and nestled against him with warmth and howls of compassion, as if he had been wounded by an arrow or bitten by a wolf.

John had been right about grief, however. It was not continuous; there were times of forgetting; there were even consolations. It was like one of those chill gray mists on the moors, but one which sometimes lifted and let him enjoy loving his dogs, and visiting Bucephalus in the village, and most of all, laughing with John.

He did not forget his purpose to kill his parents' murderers, but there was a youthful adventure in the preparations which helped to transform sadness and anger into excitement and expectation. Their first task, they decided, was to find a virgin. Then, with her guidance, they must find a unicorn who would lead them to the right Mandrakes, or any Mandrakes, so Stephen hoped, for he was prepared to kill anything that looked like a tree and walked like a man. He had only seen—clearly, at least, and then by moonlight—the hunched backs of the murderers, and it was his intention to kill as many Mandrakes as possible and hope to include the culprits; if he missed them, well, at least he would have

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reduced the menace to travelers in the forest.

John, however, was not enthusiastic about killing Mandrakes on sight.

"They live as they must," he said. "Unless they're the ones who killed your parents, why can't we leave them to their trees and warrens?" Stephen called him a coward but quickly realized that he had mistaken compassion for cowardice, a reasonable error since, apart from his parents and Miriam and John, he had met little compassion in his contemporaries. Even holiness took the form of war: the Crusades. Still, it was one thing to recognize compassion in his friend and apologize for his hasty accusation, another to cultivate the quality in himself, and he was content to receive John's help and let him think that it was only his parents' murderers he meant to kill. After all, he had once been compassionate toward a little girl whose people had promptly killed his parents.

"The biggest problem," he announced, "is to find a virgin." He had learned when he first came to the castle that he must not discuss his conquests with John, who invariably winced and changed the subject. Doubtless the boy had not yet outgrown the prudery of childhood, though Stephen had lain with his first girl when he was ten and wondered why he had waited to so advanced an age.

But a virgin was another matter.

John looked thoughtful. "I rather supposed that most of the girls in the village were virgins. The church is very clear about fornication."

"Most aren't." This was not a time to respect John's delicate sensitivities. There was deadly business at hand.

"Well, you must know the ones who are. Everybody seems to be your friend." Was there a hint of reproach in the large green eyes which dominated the thin face?

"That's my problem," said Stephen. "I've too many female friends, and when you consider the other boys, and allow at least one girl for each boy—and that's conservative—well, how many virgins are left?" He never boasted about individual conquests but never pretended that he did not like to conquer. In short he was discreet but honest.

"Possibly a few of the girls pleasure most of the boys."

"Most of the girls pleasure all of the boys." Then, remembering John's inexperience, he added tactfully, "Boys over twelve, that is."

He sang a song which he had composed in his mind but never written on parchment. Some of

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the words defeated his rudimentary writing, and the expense of the parchment was prohibitive to a villein's son.

To trap the grave-eyed unicorn,
Our monks and scribes assure,
A knight needs not a hunting horn
But a virgin for his lure.

The quarry with the doleful eyes
Has not been seen of late.
I wonder if the shortage lies
In unicorns—or bait.

"How about the word 'doleful'?" he asked proudly before John could disapprove. "Mother taught it to me, though she didn't like the song. Maybe you can show me how to write it."

"First we must find the bait."

"There *is* Miriam," said Stephen thoughtfully. "Though I hate to put her in any danger. As far as I'm concerned, she qualifies."

"She's that serious Norman girl who always looks as if she's peering into your soul? If she's turned you down, she must have turned down everybody else," said John loyally.

"But I'm not the only eel in the marsh," Stephen admitted on further thought. "Big Thomas used to pursue her night and day, and she rather seemed to like him. She used to meet him at night as she does me now. I asked her about him once, and she said she was trying to save his soul. But you never know what method a girl will use." Miriam might have turned to her life of chastity after an early indiscretion. She might be one of those maidens who gave themselves out of ignorance and then, disappointed by rough or inexperienced love-making, returned to chastity and often entered a convent. At fifteen, Miriam had enjoyed ample time for at least one disappointment. Since the castle chaplain preached incedibly dull sermons which condemned all earthly pleasures, he lost the chance to effectively condemn any pleasure; and, what with the baron's example, the power of the church was slight in the village and the castle. Furthermore, there were few recreations. Knucklebones and Hoodman Blind, yes, but they could hardly compare to what Stephen called gathering rosebuds.

"We'll just have to ask her," said John.

"Just like that? Girls have their pride." Secretly he did not want to learn that Miriam had lost her virginity.

"You don't want to waste any time, do you? You've been a dog boy for nearly two months now."

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With the help of the gatekeeper Antony, a young man who had inadvertently made their quest more difficult, Stephen arranged to meet Miriam that very night. It was Antony to whom he had given Bucephalus and who let him leave the castle, unreported to the baron, to visit his dog.

"I'm coming too," announced John, who seemed to dislike the girls Stephen had deflowered—Stephen never mentioned them by name, but John insisted that he could tell by the look in their eyes, as if they wanted another harvesting—but he professed himself eager to meet Miriam. Of course the few girls of noble blood living in the castle, the daughters of knights, were out of the question, unless Stephen wanted to lose his hide or his head.

Stephen looked doubtful. "She won't tell if both of us are there."

"I've studied dialectic. I can trick the truth out of her. You get tongue-tied sometimes at awkward moments." It was the truth. In spite of his shyness, John was far more eloquent than his father, the baron, who generally spoke in grunts.

"I just don't know—"

"Which is more important, finding a virgin or saving a girl's pride?" John's shyness concealed considerable will.

"Very well then. Tonight."

Miriam emerged from the trees and saw John with Stephen. She froze in her tracks as if a Gorgon had smitten her. The son of the liege lord! Only trouble could result from such a meeting.

"I've brought my friend," said Stephen. "I wanted you to meet him."

Miriam advanced toward them and, looking John in the eye, said,

"I am glad to see you, John. We've met at the fair but never spoken. I expect you didn't notice me. But what can you want of me now?" Perhaps she thought that Stephen was procuring for his friend. As a matter of fact, he had made such an effort with another, slightly market-worn girl and had been refused: "For your friend and not for you? That skinny little boy with the big eyes? I would rather enter the church."

John was at his most eloquent. "Just to meet someone who can read and write and talk about books. I hear you own *A History of the Kings of Britain.*"

Stephen sighed. Were they going to talk about books at such a time? But he had underestimated his friend's subtlety.

"Yes, I do. I've read it, oh, it must be a dozen times." It was rare for a villein's family to own

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a codex. Miriam was justly proud.

"My father has *Plutarch's Lives.*"

The night was hushed of cicadas, silent of thrushes, sweet with early summer. It was a night for confidences, for whispered intimacies, but John and Miriam began to discuss their books with animation and in voices so loud that Stephen had to caution them to discretion.

They sat under the many-purposed sycamore tree, and John cleverly but slowly, oh, how slowly, thought Stephen, guided the conversation toward their desired object. Miriam was surprisingly talkative, for a change, and she was able to discuss ancient rulers with knowledge and authority.

"Cleopatra is my favorite," she announced.

There was a momentary silence. The answer could hardly have been more damaging. John flashed a conspiratorial look at Stephen, who knew little about Cleopatra except that she had enjoyed many lovers and died by the bite of an asp to her breast. However, the locality of the bite seemed particularly damning to him.

"Wasn't she a bit free with her favors?" John pursued.

"Oh, great queens have privileges. I suppose you mean Caesar and Antony. Most women would have yielded to one or the other."

"But to both?" asked John. "It seems a bit, well, indiscriminate." (Must John use such enormous words?) "And there were others.

"Between, not during," said Miriam with a touch of asperity.

"But when she thought Antony had forsaken her—"

"He had for a while. He even married Octavia in Rome. Can you blame Cleopatra for consoling herself with a few Egyptian gallants? And even then she was true to Antony in her soul."

The method was clever but hopelessly long-winded, it seemed to Stephen. He began to fidget. He changed position a number of times as the ground grew hard beneath him and he tried hopelessly to follow the conversation. If they must talk about the past, why not wars and battles? Hadn't he dimly heard of a Battle of Actium? The loves of dead rulers interested him considerably less than the loves of live Miriam, and not those of her soul.

"Miriam," Stephen blurted. "What do you think of Mandrakes?"

"I'm afraid of them," she gasped, startled by the abrupt change in subject. "Isn't everyone? And you especially have reason—"

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"That's what I'm getting to. I want to track down the ones who killed my parents."

"You'll never find them in the forest. They may be underground in their warrens. They may stand still in the shadows, and you'll mistake them for trees. I don't see how—"

"But if we had a unicorn to guide us and fight with us—"

"You know how rare they are."

"Have you ever seen one?" John interjected, looking a trifle annoyed with Stephen for interrupting his devious but promising approach.

"No, never. But I don't go into the forest when I can help it. And when I do go, it's usually with my father and brothers to feed the swine, and the swine make a lot of racket, and—"

"Stephen, she's never seen a unicorn," said John knowingly to his friend.

"Miriam, would you lead us?"

"I'd be terribly afraid. I'd—"

"Aren't you a virgin?" cried Stephen, exasperated beyond endurance by endless talking around the Maypole.

She gave him a wistful stare. "You ought to know the answer to that, Stephen," and, proud as Eleanor of Aquitaine going into exile, she turned and strode away from them.

"She may not do," John sighed. "Any girl who admires Cleopatra that much—" His disappointment was clear. He had definitely liked the girl.

"Miriam," Stephen called desperately. "It's for my parents' sake. I'm sorry I doubted you."

She stopped, hesitated, and returned to them with slow, graceful steps, and took Stephen's face between her hands, and kissed him on the cheek. It was decidedly a sisterly kiss.

The ivory Madonna was flushed like pink marble. Tears welled in her eyes.

"My poor Stephen, of course I'll help you find your unicorn."

## CHAPTER IV

It was not difficult to escape the castle and village for their Mandrake hunt. The children of villeins, accompanied by the son of a liege lord, did not as a rule make such expeditions into pathless forests, but Antony, the gatekeeper, was so grateful for the gift of Bucephalus that he agreed at once to let both boys leave the castle while the baron was visiting his friend. Furthermore, he promised that after his watch he would see to the feeding of the dogs. John would simply skip his daily lessons with the castle chaplain,

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who "knows less than I do anyway," and take the consequences on his father's return. But Miriam's problem was greater than that of the boys. She was expected to spend her time at the handloom in her cottage. But her resourcefulness equaled her virtue. She told her mother that a young friend was ill with the wasting fever. Could she take her a posset and sit with her through the day? Her mother was so celebrated for her healing remedies that some mistook her for a witch, though she was a stout, stolid, kindly woman, not in the least witchlike, who could read a codex better than a conjuration and who had never discovered Miriam's nocturnal sojournings and did not guess the plan of the moment.

Thus they adventured, the three of them, into England's most dangerous and demon-ridden forest, and from his face you might have thought that Stephen was bound for the Holy Land, though his friends were considerably less enthusiastic and looked as if a Saracen lurked behind every bush.

Stephen and John both wore green tunics and carried bows over their shoulders. Stephen also carried the shepherd's stave with which he had battled wolves and thieves, and John wore a knife at his sash. Miriam, clutching a lantern in case they were forced to spend a night in the forest, was arrayed in her usual ankle-long robe of brown homespun, and also, said Stephen, "in your virginity."

"It won't stop any arrows," Miriam sighed.

Stephen was tempted to say, "It's stopped a great many"—he was used to bantering with his girls—but decided that this was neither the girl nor the place.

By daylight, the forest was eerie but not sinister. After all, woodsmen chopped trees and farmers fed swine in its outer reaches. There were areas, to be sure, so thickly grown with oak and elm and sycamore and entangled with moss that no weeds grew on the ground for lack of sunlight. You felt like an animal trapped beneath a great black net. Happily there were also open meadows sprinkled with daisies, little pools in a dark country, where the surrounding trees glittered in the sun and looked as if they harbored nothing more dangerous than a hare or a partridge. And there was the celebrated Stane, a Roman road which led through the forest from Chichester to London and was patrolled by a zealous order of monks who had replaced the Biblical injunction "Turn the other cheek" with "Strike the other cheek." But though they had to cross the road, pitted and overgrown with weeds in

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spite of its occasional traffic, they knew enough to avoid it on their hunt. No unicorns had ever been seen on a road made by men.

Stephen requested silence. "We mustn't frighten the unicorns. We must just stroll along casually, as it were, and let them seek us out." But John and Miriam soon forgot his request and returned to their discussion of ancient rulers. Stephen guessed that they were talking because the forest frightened them.

"Julius Caesar was the greatest ruler in antiquity," John announced when Miriam repeated her admiration for Cleopatra.

Stephen fretted to name Alexander.

"And Cleopatra used him for all he was worth," interjected Miriam.

"But she didn't learn enough. She lost out to his nephew. She was a real simpleton at the Battle of Actium when she withdrew her ships too soon."

"Alexander," announced Stephen with finality.

"No, Stephen, it was Octavius who beat her. Later he was called Augustus."

"I know that, John." (He knew no such thing). "But if we're talking about ability, we have to mention Alexander, don't we? I simply wanted to say that he conquered more land and more women than anyone else, including Caesar. He must be the greatest."

"More land but not more women."

Suddenly they plunged into one of those dark wells of sheer, unbroken forest, rather like falling from a boat into the sea, and ancient rulers, even if one of them had built the Stane, seemed remote and unimportant. There was not a hole in the leafy surface above them.

"Hush," said Stephen. "The unicorns will hear us and run away before they recognize Miriam's qualifications. And this is the kind of place they like the best."

Stephen felt a flush of excitement; he was also afraid for the first time, both for himself and the friends he had so lightly included in his revenge. Though he had never seen the ocean nor learned to swim, he imagined that they were traversing the bottom of the sea with trees like sharks and octopi. He wished for a dolphin in the form of a unicorn to guide them. Fear was almost tangible in the air, like the inky cloud of a squid. Deer and hare bolted at their approach, and Stephen thought: for every animal, even the biggest, there is at least one enemy, one reason to bolt. He

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felt a prickling down his spine like a furry-footed caterpillar and wondered if, even before the final confrontation, he was going to become a coward or lose his head. But John and Miriam were so much more frightened that he forgot his own fear in comforting them. Not that they complained. But John looked as white as the cliffs at Dover, and Miriam was tight-lipped and silent, even about Cleopatra. It was not surprising. They had come to kill. Perhaps they had come to be killed.

They had not meant to spend an evening in the forest. They lacked coverlets for the nights, which even in summer grew chilly before morning, and their provisions were limited, but they had walked so far that it was impossible to retrace their steps by dusk.

"We must find a hollow tree," said Stephen when they reached a less thickly forested area, where the trees were huge but the sunset was visible in patches above them and a nearby stream made a pleasant murmurous meandering. "One of us must stand watch at the entrance while the others sleep."

Thanks to lightning, hollow trees were numerous, and the one they found in a clearing was dead and leafless and almost like a cave, with two distinct chambers. They settled for the night—the second chamber was carpeted with dried leaves almost as if woodsmen had come ahead of them and made a huge bed. They were as tired as if they had fought in a tourney. John complained that he had never gone to bed without a bath, but he made no move toward the dark sinuosity of the stream, and Stephen, who had rarely gone to bed with a bath, made no move to encourage him. They lit their lantern and made a supper on cheese, bread, and beer. John, who was not used to beer, grew a little tipsy and had to be hushed when he announced in a loud voice that the assassination of Caesar was the most disastrous event in Roman history and began to recite in Latin from the Gallic Wars: "All Gaul is divided into three parts. . . ."

"Miriam, you stand the first watch," said Stephen. "It's the easiest. Then you can sleep the rest of the night without interruption."

She took up her stance like a Knight of the Temple, and the boys reluctantly extinguished the lantern—it might attract thieves—and remarked gratefully on the bright moonlight, which penetrated even the second chamber and revealed their shapes in dim outline.

Sleep came slowly to Ste-

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phen, and then the curious dream that someone was kissing him on the cheek. It was not a pleasant kiss. It was moist and sucking, and he awoke to realize that the dream was truth, and a figure had cuddled into his arms. At first he thought that Miriam had grown tired of her watch and crept into the leaves beside him, and the alarming suspicion came to him that she was not, after all their investigations, a virgin.

He sat up with a start, and dislodged the little girl who had sidled past Miriam into the tree and into his arms. She rolled onto the leaves and sat looking at him.

"An' you please, sir, I was lost in the forest," she said. In the faint light he could not distinguish her features, but to judge from her size she must be five or six, and her voice was sweet and melodious. She was probably a Mandrake whom some villagers had discovered in their midst and, kinder than his own neighbors, returned to the forest. If she had lived all her life in the forest, she would not have so sweet a voice, nor even speak English.

"What do you want?" he asked gruffly.

"Shelter and warmth, no more."

"Which is your village?"

She hesitated; he hesitated no longer.

"Miriam," he called. John, tired to the bone, continued to sleep a few feet away from him.

Sleepy and apologetic, Miriam appeared in the doorway. For once her dignity had deserted her.

"I'm afraid I fell asleep," she said, then, seeing the little girl, "Did she slip by me?"

"Yes," he muttered. "And she's just had breakfast."

"A Mandrake." She spoke the word with fear and revulsion. "What shall we do with her?"

He knew what fat Michael would have done with her; he knew what he had come to the forest to do. But still he could not bring himself to murder a child. He lifted her—it was not easy with his diminished strength—and carried her out of the tree.

"Would you turn me out into the forest?" the small voice wailed.

He would as soon have kicked one of his dogs. But his own weakness—he could hardly stand—confirmed her nature. With a tap to her bottom, he said, "Go back to your parents," She skittered among the trees; briefly she looked back at him with the same bewilderment he had seen in that other Mandrake child.

To Miriam: "I'll stand watch till its time for John. Get some sleep now."

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"Stephen," Miriam called over her shoulder. "Do you suppose that we've happened on one of their lairs? That the child has a family? Some of them live in trees instead of warrens, you know."

"If she has, let's hope it's small enough for us to take on alone, since we haven't found a unicorn yet." He could not resist a hint of reproach. They had wasted a whole day and must suffer a whole night with Mandrakes in the neighborhood because Miriam had been slow to lure them a horned guide.

"We'll find one tomorrow," she said with confidence. Or was it bravado?

In a little while, and long before he was due to go on watch, John joined him.

"You go to sleep now, Stephen. I'll take over."

But Stephen had lost his wish to sleep. He told John about the little girl. "I think we should both stand guard."

The moon, occasionally visible through the branches, crossed the sky like a giant lethargic snail. He had watched it with a multitude of girls and wanted to slow its descent. Tonight he would have liked to hasten it to its rest and summon the sun.

John pressed his head against Stephen's shoulder. At other times, when he talked eloquently about Caesar and Cleopatra, it was easy to forget that he was a child of twelve; now he might have been six.

"Cold, little friend?"

"A bit."

He put his arm around John, and, while fear did not go from him, he was afraid for an excellent reason: the safety of his friends. It was almost as if his Saint Alexander had sent him a brother and a sister to compensate for taking his parents, and at whatever cost he must protect them from harm.

"Stephen," said John, "I'm a terrible coward. I'm not really cold, I'm scared. I have been ever since we left the village, only it got worse after dark. I even had nightmares when I tried to sleep."

"I'm scared too," admitted Stephen. "You know what they say, though: Two fears joined can make a courage." It was not a very profound statement and in fact he had composed it just for the occasion. But John seemed pleased and reassured.

"Then I feel better," he said. "If I'm one of the fears, I must be part of the courage. For a while, I felt I was by myself."

"Never say that again—not while you have me."

"Stephen, did you know there were trees so close to us here? I thought we were in a clearing. But look—there are three—what are they? Small sycamores do you think?"

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The Mandrakes were upon them.

There was no time to lift a bow, nor even stave and knife. It was hand to hand, but the Mandrakes seemed to have many hands. You could kick at their bodies and they recoiled like a man. But their innumerable tendrils lashed your eyes and got in your ears and made you feel you were battling an octopus. Stephen could beat every boy and many of the men in the village. He had once saved a neighbor's lamb not from one but two particularly large and hungry wolves. He had not been fearless by any means; only fools were without fear. But fear, in the past, had given him a special prowess against a stronger enemy. But now the enemy was too strong. Surprised, outnumbered, weakened by the little girl, he knew that defeat was inevitable, and defeat in the ghastly form of suffocation. Sturdy, strapping boy that he was, he could not conquer these little moving forests, which, in a sense, epitomized the great forest, its mystery, its mastery, its hatred of men. The Romans had built a road in these parts, but little as he knew of history, he felt sure that they had not been harassed by Mandrakes as they cut through the undergrowth and laid their massive blocks.

Then he was on the ground and he felt as if a tree had fallen on him. Frantically he sought to dislodge the suffocating tendrils from his mouth and nose. Simply to breathe became his first concern and, had his hands been free, to shut his ears against the shrill high keening which was like a score of wind devils shrieking in the treetops.

His feeling was not so much fear as shame and utter uselessness. Here, ill-armed, wandering aimlessly, he had led his friends into the very lair of the Mandrakes. He deserved to die, but not now, not now, dear Alexander. Let him live and rescue John and Miriam.

He managed to jerk his head momentarily free of the tendrils and glimpsed John, gasping for breath beneath a second Mandrake, and Miriam too, who had awakened and come to help them. What could she do, though, this slender young girl, as the third Mandrake's tendrils snaked at her garment and encircled her neck?

He was losing consciousness when he heard her cry:

"Unicorn, help us!"

He came to his senses to find his head in Miriam's lap. She was bending over him and saying:

"John is all right. So am I. How do you feel?"

This is Heaven, he thought, a place he had never anticipated

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with any particular pleasure. At least I'm with my friends. He raised his head and felt tongues of fire flickering over his body and wondered if it were Hell.

But sunlight slanted through the leafless branches of the familiar hollow tree.

Then he saw the unicorn.

The sun had glittered his horn into a tiny rainbow. Two of the Mandrakes had fled. The third lay panting on the ground, at the feet of the motionless unicorn, whose gossamer fur had been streaked and torn, but who lifted his horn in triumph. His eyes were warm and intelligent, like those of a man, not an animal. He looked at Stephen with a level, friendly stare.

"He must have been standing guard over us all along," explained Miriam. "I thought I glimpsed him before we found our tree. When I called to him during the attack, he came straightaway. You ought to have seen him rout those Mandrakes! Poor John was half suffocated like you—I was too scared to do a thing except scream—but he plunged right in and ran two of them off into the forest and left the third one there. I think he got an extra whack with that one."

"We'll call him Alexander," said Stephen.

Then, as if salvation by a unicorn were a daily occurrence, Miriam began to build a fire against the morning chill, and John announced that, chill or not, he was going to bathe in the stream. Stephen was wondering what a slightly suffering and greatly wondering leader ought to do at such a time and, unable to reach an answer, hunched beside the fire to recover his strength from the small but growing heat. The unicorn began to gather sticks in his mouth and add them to the fire, and Stephen felt a growing hunger which hurt more than his wounds. They still had some bread and cheese (John had finished the beer), and though Stephen wished desperately for some hot porridge, the plain, hearty fare brought him immediate nourishment. The wounded Mandrake watched him without so much as lifting an arm and Stephen thought: he or ones like him killed my parents, but hatred and anger did not spew up in him as he expected; rather, he wished that his enemy did not look quite so miserable with pain.

John, resigned to a few more minutes without a bath, joined in a breakfast which threatened to exhaust their meager supplies.

"His horn looks like a scimitar," John remarked on one of the unicorn's absences to gather firewood. "It isn't

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straight, it curves in a very wicked and beautiful fashion. And it must be mother-of-pearl, just as we thought. Notice how it catches the morning sun. Do you suppose he would like some cheese?"

The cheese remaining to them would hardly suffice for a cottage mouse.

"No," said Stephen. "It's much too coarse for such an ethereal animal." (John had taught him the adjective.)

"At least we can ask," said Miriam.

Soon the animal was nibbling their last morsels from Miram's hand. He was a little wary of the boys but completely at ease with her. (And at ease with the cheese, thought Stephen wistfully. We won't offer him any bread).

"Do you think he will stay with us?" Miriam asked.

"Oh, yes, we've won him now. At least you have. He seems to have taken a special liking to you."

"It's my qualification," she explained. "You know, it never did me any good before. It just made me wonder what I had missed."

"A lot," muttered Stephen, "but for our sake I'm glad you did."

Having breakfasted with them, the animal moved to stand above the fallen Mandrake and placed a hoof on his chest. Apparently he was asking if he or Stephen should make the kill. In the fashion of unicorns, once attracted to humans he had become their servant.

The Mandrake made no move to rise. Fluid oozed from a wound in his side where his flesh had been parted by a savage gouge, and he was keening steadily now, though his voice was low and pathetic and rather like the wind sighing in a single small tree.

Stephen had accomplished at least a part of his mission; he could begin his revenge. There was every reason to allow the Mandrake to be killed by the unicorn, or to kill him with his stave. Wasn't that why they had come into the forest?

He examined his fallen enemy. A boy, not a man, he saw from the pale face hidden behind the beard. Perhaps the little girl's brother. Big boy, though. Tall as a man, almost, and decidedly a menace, if he were allowed to recover his strength.

"He's not going anywhere just yet. Alexander will guard him while we bathe our wounds in the stream."

It was one of those clear, gently twisting streams with reeds along the bank, too shallow for drowning even if you had never learned to swim. Modest Miriam bathed apart

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from them. Stephen scraped the soft fur from a cattail and spread it on John's cuts and bruises. "It will soothe them and help them to heal." His mother had taught him the remedy after his bout with the wolves, and John was quick to return the gesture. Then Stephen said reluctantly, "I guess we had better finish off the Mandrake. He may be one of those who killed my parents."

"But what will the little girl do? He's probably her brother."

"That's not our worry."

"I rather think the ones who killed your parents were the family of the child who was beheaded at the fair."

"But I tried to help her."

"They wouldn't know that."

"You're saying I shouldn't kill this one?"

John looked pensive. "They live as they must," he repeated.

"Well, I am going to kill him, before he gets up and kills one of us."

The creature had not moved. Stephen examined him closely and noticed the human outline beneath the foliagelike hair or the hairlike foliage. Naked, filthy, murderous—but still a boy.

"They attacked us, didn't they?"

"After we took their lair."

"God's bowels," he swore, kneeling and rubbing some of the fur from a cattail into the creature's wound. Here he was healing the very creature he had meant to kill! John was making him soft and womanish. Then to his friends: "Come on now. We must be on our way."

"Home?" asked Miriam hopefully.

"That might be best." (He was sure it was best.) "We haven't any more provisions except a little bread. We can come back another time."

But the unicorn was not concerned with provisions. When they started toward the village, he blocked their path.

"He wants us to follow him," said Stephen excitedly.

"Must we?" asked John with a noticeable lack of excitement.

"We owe him that for saving our lives," said Miriam. After all, he was *her* unicorn. "I wonder where he wants to go."

"He's probably angry I didn't kill the Mandrake," said Stephen.

"Stephen," said John, taking his hand. "You did as you had to do. It wasn't in you to kill him, helpless like that. I'm proud of you."

"I'm not proud of myself."

"You will be."

Behind them the wounded Mandrake stopped his keening and watched them with puzzlement.

Ahead of them lay the Valley of the Unicorns.

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## CHAPTER V

His first impression was an immensity of light, solid, unbroken, impenetrable. He stumbled out of the forest ahead of his friends and behind the unicorn and threw up his hands at the sudden, wounding, brilliance. He seemed to hear the roaring of many brush fires. It was the light which spoke. The dark forest, the pastel glades, now this—another country, which seemed to float in a great nimbus blending earth and sky, gradually breaking into its individual facets, the meadow of yellow flowers, jonquil, daisy, daffodil—spring flowers miraculously mingling with summer flowers—the sunlight dripping from the black surrounding trees which enclosed the light like a wall.

In the midst of that incredible burning grazed the unicorns: a herd of them, perhaps a dozen, ranging from stag to newborn calf, safe in their island of sunlight, secure from encroachment of forest and Mandrake—soft and russet of fur, large-eyed, kind-eyed, kingly-eyed, lifting their horns to greet the approach of their friend and those he had led to them out of the forest.

Quickly Alexander joined their ranks and began a silent communication, telling them, no doubt, where he had been, what he had seen, about the Mandrakes. There was neither touch nor sound between them, but the look of knowledge, fear, anger, joy—the hollow tree, the battle, the triumph—entered their eloquent eyes.

"It's the Valley of the Unicorns," whispered John, who doubtless, like Stephen, felt as if he needed to whisper, as if loud voices would scatter the herd to the winds from which they seemed to draw their grace and agility.

Only Miriam kept her presence of mind. She advanced with precise steps and then, smiling, she stood among them, stroking the soft fur of their uplifted muzzles.

John was tugging at Stephen's hand. "Stephen, come on. I think they expect us." But Stephen lingered with a strange reluctance. As if he were tolerated only for the sake of his friends. Not one of the animals had met his gaze. He had not killed the Mandrake.

At last John dropped his hand and followed Miriam among the unicorns and he, too, had come among friends. He knelt and embraced a calf.

"Stephen, look! He seems to know me. He isn't at all afraid."

Tentatively Stephen followed his friends.

He might have been invisible for all the notice they took of him. He, beloved of animals,

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dog boy to the baron, idol to Bucephalus, was less than nothing to them. He opened his mouth to speak and they moved away from him. He raised a hand to caress and touched thin air.

They are angry with me, he thought. I have failed to kill their enemy and they are punishing me.

No, anger is too strong a word. They are indifferent to me.

He would almost have welcomed a hoof pawing the ground, a horn lowered to warn him out of the circle. But he could not break their implacable indifference. The castle chaplain might have said that all men are committed to an eternal struggle between heaven and earth, spirit and sense. Evil men fought and stole and lechered after the flesh. Good men followed the Crusades. Crusader Stephen had lowered his lance. I have not killed the animal which is earth, flesh, sense, he thought, the brutish Mandrake whose very birth is out of the ground and who trails its filth and slime to the grave.

There was nothing to be done. He was hurt, desperately hurt at his exclusion, but with a total and dismaying honesty he saw in his mind the fallen Mandrake and knew that not even now would he strike the killing blow. Perhaps the creature would recover to fight him again; perhaps they would try to kill each other in the full hot flush of battle. But wounded, helpless—no, such a one he could not kill. My spirit is hopelessly entangled with flesh, he thought. I who could have been an avenging angel of the Lord have failed in my mission. Doubtless I would have spared Jericho, Sodom, Gomorrah. . . .

He felt the accumulated weariness of the last two days, the walking, the long watch, the little sleep, the fight by the hollow tree. Here was sustenance, but not for him. Here was wonderment, but only for his friends. He spun to the edge of the clearing and fell to his knees, and great tears welled in his eyes when he saw that his friends had not even noticed his exclusion. John had lifted the baby unicorn in his arms, like a young Christ with a lamb. Miriam was seated on the grass, and the animals waited to receive her caresses and lay their heads in her lap.

Was it fair? John, at least, had approved, indeed helped to prompt his decision to spare the Mandrake. Ah, but John was a soft-hearted little boy; he, Stephen, was a young man who must assume his own rightful burden, his own guilt. "Vengeance is mine," saith the Lord.

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He had not avenged the death of his parents.

He buried his face in the grass, and through his tears he saw a grasshopper moving his slow, deliberate way across the meadow.

"Be my friend, little grasshopper," he muttered. Then with a sudden leap, the insect was out of his vision. Even the little creatures had deserted him. He felt the fire of his wounds, the painful pressing of grass against torn flesh. My wounds will heal, he thought, but the fire of shame is unquenchable.

A shadow fell across him. *It is John or Miriam, no doubt, come to ask me why I have left the herd. I do not want them to see my tears.*

He did not look up from the ground.

"Go away," he said. He smelled a fragrance of herbs and flowers and felt the warmth of the body above him. Blinking, he raised his head.

A unicorn stood above him. Female, delicate and graceful and yet with the grace of full, ripe maturity. She had bathed in clear stream waters, walked in bergamot and thyme and wild grasses. She lowered her head and pressed it against his cheek as if she could take his tears to herself. Impulsively he embraced her, and she stood in silent communion with him. He felt the beating of her heart, and it seemed to him a heart which could encompass the griefs of the world.

I must show her my gratitude, he thought. But what can I, empty-handed except for a little stale bread and a bow and arrows, give to this unicorn, who alone of all her people has come to me, the outcast, and accepted my caresses?

He jumped to his feet and, breaking a piece of wild grapevine which straggled into the meadow, strung it with daffodils and placed the garland around her horn.

She looked at him with grave, loving, and familiar eyes. . . .

"Shall we tell anyone what we saw?" John asked as they neared the village.

"No one would believe us."

"Did we really see what we think?" asked Miriam. "It seemed so—wondrous."

"We saw it," said Stephen.

"Shall we ever go back?"

"We don't need to. It's enough to know that—he started to say "she"—"that they're there."

"We didn't kill any Mandrakes," said Miriam.

"The best journeys are those whose ends can't be foreseen."

"Stephen, you sound like a poet," said John. "You even look different."

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"What do you mean, John?"

"It's as if you've brought some of the brightness back with you."

"It's only the sun," he said.

"No. . .it's as if you wore a garland of daffodils."

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I wish to express a profound debt to *A History of Everyday Things in England* by Marjorie Quennell.

My unicorn song, which I wrote more than a decade ago, is reprinted with the permission of the Wings Press.

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ABOUT THE COVER: With Apollo 17 in December 1972, U. S. manned exploration of the Moon ceases in favor of a period of consolidation in which the accent will be on reducing the overall cost of space travel by means of reuseable vehicles such as the shuttle. It may be twenty years or more, therefore, before the scene on our cover becomes reality; it shows a group of cylindrical units which could be used as space stations in Earth or Lunar orbit or be landed, as here, by a basic propulsion module or "space tug" similar to the one seen landing. This Lunar base could accommodate a crew of twelve. Painting by David Hardy, from CHALLENGE OF THE STARS by David A. Hardy and Patrick Moore, Mitchell Beazley 1972 (published in the U. S. by Rand McNally).

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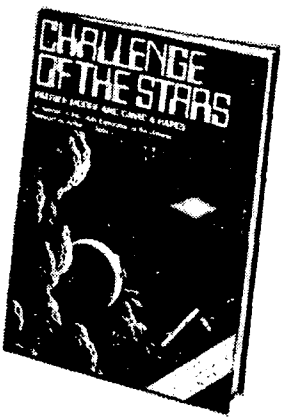


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You might think that Mr. Sladek has peaked after reading the incredible ending to this new parody, but don't worry, we have others.

# Ralph 4F

## by H*G* G*RNSB*CK

### 1911 Winner of the H*g* Award

*Chapter I. The Runaway*

Ralph 4F, the world's chief scientific expert, studied the calendar. Today was March 15, 2720. With any luck, his intricate radium experiment should be completed within five days. That would make it—

Ralph's calculations were interrupted by a frantic cry that issued from the *Peer-afar* machine.

"Help! Help!"

This machine, through a complicated arrangement of scientific apparatus, allowed the inventor to see and hear events which were not actually right before him, but dozens, even *hundreds of miles away.* While the old-fashioned telephone had used wires to transmit only voices, the Peer-afar used *vibrational waves* traveling at high speed through the aether, to transmit voices and images together! Ralph glanced now at the polished mirror-plate of the Peer-afar.

He was looking right into the frightened eyes of a pretty young woman, and it wasn't hard to guess from her surroundings what had frightened her, for she and an elderly man in banker's clothes seemed to be the occupants of a runaway motorcar! As Ralph watched in horror, the young lady lost consciousness, and the vehicle careened out of sight!

Without wasting a second, the powerfully built scientific inventor sprang to the controls of his special flyer, the *Hummingbird.* Like its namesake, the *Hummingbird* was capable of flying vertically, sideways, backwards—even of standing still in midair, for hours at a time, as though gravity were a mere fancy.

In a short time, Ralph had brought the craft to a stop over



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the runaway motorcar. Then, lowering a powerful magnet, he picked up the car as a child might pick up an iron filing.

*Chapter II. Fenster*

When Ralph had revived his guests with tablets of artificial brandy, which intoxicated without aftereffects, they introduced themselves.

"I am Jerome V8," said the banker, "and this is my daughter, Doris XK100. How can we ever thank you for saving our lives?"

Ralph blushed, and dared not glance at the pretty young lady. "By allowing me to show you around our city," he said. "You are both strangers here, I believe?"

Doris smiled, revealing a dimple. "Yes, we just got off the 'jet' aeroplane from Council Bluffs, didn't we, Dad?"

"That's right," agreed the distinguished banker. "Tell me, Ralph, why is it called a 'jet' plane? It certainly didn't look black to me!"

"No, indeed." Ralph, who had invented the "jet," chuckled with kindly amusement at the older man's error. "I called it the 'jet' not because it is black, but because of the way it *jettisons* hot gases from the rear. These, pushing against the air, drive the craft ever forward."*

As he explained, Ralph studied the girl keenly. He felt a deep attraction to Doris, though he had but known her for a few minutes, as measured by his extremely accurate electric clock.

"But see here," he said. "You haven't told me how you came to be trapped in that runaway car."

Jerome V8 looked serious. "I believe it to be the work of an old enemy of ours, a disappointed suitor for Doris's hand, named Fenster 2814T."

*Chapter III. Sight-seeing*

Aloft once more in his flyer, Ralph pointed out to his two guests many of the city's worthwhile sights. There were the great smoking electrical power plants, busily turning black fossils into pure light as easily as a cow turns grass to milk. There were sewage plants, waterworks, factories and office buildings, streets, highways and mighty bridges. Jerome V8 expressed interest in the mammoth traffic jams, filled with motorcars of every description. Doris was impressed by the famous "skyscraper" buildings, especially the huge Empire State building with its giant climbing ape.

**Aeronauts of the 'jet' age will, of course, realize Ralph's mistake here. It is actually the* air *which pushes against the* hot gases. *Ralph was tired at the time, and had a lot on his mind.*

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On landing, Ralph took the banker for a walk, while Doris refreshed herself at an elaborate and up-to-date beauty parlor. The two men walked past store windows displaying an astonishing variety of modern goods: waterless hand cleansers, soap powders that were kind to hands, tiny cigars, sun-tanning lotion and shoes of artificial rubber, electrical toothbrushes, radio sets hardly bigger than cigar boxes, electrical self-stimulators, comfortable trusses, paperweights of the Statue of Liberty, and a breath-takingly realistic replica of dog excrement. Jerome V8 marveled at mysteriously luminous crucifixes, metal-plated baby shoe mementos, a dribble glass, coin-operated photographic and dry-cleaning establishments, and new artificial fabrics which looked and felt like wool, but were far more expensive.

"I wanted the opportunity of talking to you, sir," Ralph said. "I know this may seem forward of me, but I'd like to ask if you have any objection to my—my calling on your daughter."

"Done!" cried the old man, wringing his hand. "Now let's go see how Doris is getting along."

As they approached the beauty parlor, a rude stranger, carrying a heavy bundle, brushed past them. Ralph scarcely glanced at the swarthy man, whose countenance was shaded by the peak of a cloth cap. But Jerome V8 looked at the stranger, staggered and grew pale. "It is—" he gasped, and, clutching his chest, slumped to the ground. Ralph bore him inside and looked for Doris.

She was nowhere to be found.

*Chapter IV. Voice from the Grave*

"His heart has stopped. Something must have given him a terrible shock," muttered Ralph, bending over the disagreeable old corpse.

"I'm a heart surgeon," said a man stepping forward from the crowd of curious onlookers. "Can I help?"

"You might attempt to re-graft some veins from the old banker's legs into his heart," Ralph suggested. "I know it has seldom been attempted, but here's how it might work." Rapidly he sketched a schematic diagram on the old man's stiff shirt front. Then he turned to the staff of the beauty parlor. "I want all the lights and mirrors directed upon this massage table over here. Boil this set of manicure scissors and knives, and get plenty of clean towels." In another minute he had converted an electrical hair dryer into an emergency heart-lung machine.

Several days later, the old

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banker everyone had given up for dead spoke—a voice from the grave. "I think," he said, "that account would be ingrown cheese. . ."

Still later, Ralph asked him about his attack.

"Yes, it was seeing that man carrying the bundle—he looked just like Fenster 2814T. If I hadn't known better, I'd have guessed that he had Doris in that bag. Where is daughter Doris, by the way?" At that moment, the old man expired a second time—this time from *old age*—the killer and crippler science will never defeat.

Doris abducted! Ralph bit his lip until the blood ran cold, for he had no doubt the stranger *was* Fenster and that he had kidnaped Doris XK100! But where could he have taken her?

"Where could they be?"

*Chapter V. The Turning Point*

"I think I can help you there," said a newsboy with an honest manner. "Fenster 2814T and his lovely victim are most likely at his secret laboratory—an artificial moon circling about the earth."

*Chapter VI. Fenster's Mistake*

In one corner of the magnesium room sat a clergyman, chained to a rubidium chair by unbreakable ytterium chains. In his bound hands was a prayerbook, opened at the marriage service. Strapped to a vanadium table in the center of the laboratory lay Doris. Fenster stood lowering at her and gloating.

"So you won't marry me, eh?"

Doris wept and struggled against the iridum straps, but to no avail. Fenster spoke again.

"Not good enough for you, I s'pose, like your precious inventor, the accursed Ralph 4F! But now you *must* marry me, will-ye or nill-ye, and there's nothing Ralph can do about that. Ha ha ha, I'd like very much to see him invent his way out of this one!"

At that moment Ralph 4F burst open the curium door, rushed across the room, and delivered Fenster such a compliment upon the nose that the blood flowed freely. Two policemen appeared, ready to drag the cowardly 2814T away.

"But how—?" he gasped.

Ralph smiled. "You made one mistake, Fenster—that of gloating over your victim for thirteen weeks. I located your 'moon' lab by means of an electrical telescope that greatly increases my powers of observation. Then I used my radio transmitter to draw off all the aether between you and earth, so that you sank gently to the ground and were, as we say, electrically 'grounded.' Then I

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took the nearest police station to pieces, brought them here via airship, and reassembled them all around you. You're in jail, Fenster, and if you hadn't been so busy smirking, a glance at your altimeter would have told you as much."

The baffled criminal was taken away and beaten.

Doris and Ralph clasped hands; their eyes announced their engagement. "My name will be yours," she said, "Ralph 4F. Like this:

4 F R
For ev-er!"

Ralph took up the game: "U R Y I * 2 ¢ I M 4 U 4 F R You are why I start to sense I am for you forever!"

"X QQ me," she replied. "I ½ 2 P."

—JOHN SLADEK


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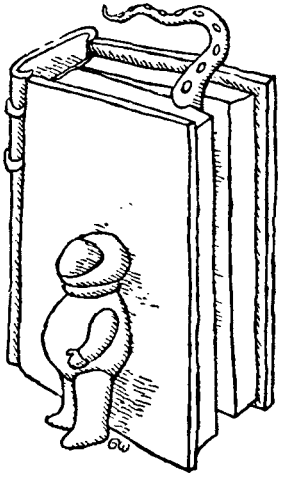
JAMES BLISH

# BOOKS

**THE WRONG END OF TIME, John Brunner; Doubleday, $4.95**
**ULTIMATE WORLD, Hugo Gernsback; Walker, $5.95**
**HAWKSHAW, Ron Goulart; Doubleday, $4.95**
**STRANGE DOINGS, R. A. Lafferty; Scribners, $5.95**
**THE BOOK OF SKULLS, Robert Silverberg; Scribners, $5.95**

SO MUCH—AT LEAST IN terms of wordage—of John Brunner's recent work has been experimental (STAND ON ZANZIBAR, THE JAGGED ORBIT) that it comes as a surprise to find that THE WRONG END OF TIME is quite straightforward in both idea and narrative. It is set in an America of the relatively near future, an America which has returned to complete isolationism behind "the world's most perfect defensive system." Thanks to excellent high-level spying, the Soviets know every detail of this system, which is of course primarily an attack or deterrent system, and it is this knowledge which has played the largest role in preventing World War III for decades. Now, however, an alien spaceship has appeared near the orbit of Pluto and appears to be preparing to lob a bomb of its own onto an American city. The aliens appear to know that one will be enough to obliterate the planet—we would do the rest of the job ourselves.

The discovery is Russian (the U. S. space program has long been abandoned), but the Russians have been able to come up with no ideas for averting the disaster. They therefore decide to send an agent with scientific training to the States, posing as a Cana-



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dian, to see if we can come up with something. His job is made almost impossible by the fact that behind its wall of missiles, American society has become completely frozen, conformist, and uninterested in any idea at all above the gadget level. It is run by the Department of Defense—the President is now a figurehead not of a political party, but of one of the armed forces, and he is replaced not by elections but by palace revolutions—and policed by an electronically sophisticated, ubiquitous security force against whose agents nobody has any civil rights whatsoever. There are still some non-conformists or dropouts, called rebs, but they are uniformly hated and feared, and of course have no social mobility or resources at all. Still worse, the man who has the solution to the problem, though he doesn't know it himself, is not only a reb, but black—and racial relations are worse than ever.

The possibilities for continuous and increasing tension are obvious, and with his usual expertise Brunner exploits them all. The characters, though rather unreal, are alive and individual enough to be interesting and to enrich the cloak-and-dagger plot. The whole reads rather as though Brunner, as a respite from being a science-fictional Dos Passos, decided to take a turn at being a science-fictional Eric Ambler. It works; you'll enjoy it.

The previously unpublished Gernsback novel, we are told, was written in 1958-9, and reveals painfully that the late and much-respected editor and publisher had learned absolutely nothing about the craft of fiction since his 1911 RALPH 124C41+—and that though he must have read masses of other writers' science fiction in the nearly half a century intervening, none of it got through to him. What this probably means is that he simply had no gift for fiction, for any writer with the slightest talent cannot help but pick up new techniques from his reading, and be influenced by the evolution of his chosen field.

Sam Moskowitz, the editor, whose reported chief task was to cut out all the non-fiction essays which comprised about half of the original manuscript, says of the remainder: "ULTIMATE WORLD is a highly original and entertaining book conveying a message of emphatic importance. It is written well and reads easily." Well, there is a message and it is important, but we've seen it often before (though never in my experience so *un*persuasively): war must be eliminated. Otherwise the two quoted

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sentences are untrue. The book is incompetent, pedantic, graceless, incredible, unpopulated and boring.

The jacket design is credited to one Carl Weiss, but it is not only in the style of, but is actually signed by, the late Frank R. Paul. But this is only a minor blunder compared to that of having published the novel at all. It accomplishes nothing but the placing of a blot on the memory of a justly honored man.

The charm of Ron Goulart's particular brand of zaniness is undeniable in many of his short stories, but at novel length, for me at least, it wears off pretty rapidly. The present sample, furthermore, is in a way part of a trilogy, the two previous installments of which are GADGET MAN and AFTER THINGS FELL APART. What they have in common is a United States which, instead of setting like concrete into a monolith as in the Brunner novel, has disintegrated both socially and politically (a rather more likely fate, I think, for so large and increasingly ungovernable a country).

Otherwise there's no connection, and in fact even the background isn't used to unify even the individual novels, let alone the triplet. Instead, Goulart's territory has become so diversified culturally, as well as in every other way, that every time his characters change locations (and I invoke the motion picture associations of that word intentionally) the background changes so drastically that they might just as well have moved into another country.

This is destructive to continuity, but it's good for showing off innovativeness—one of Goulart's chief gifts—and for distracting the reader, by the sheer number and speed of the changes, from the fact that any single given situation is improbable to the point of being outright *outre*. That last element doesn't matter, anyhow; any reader at all familiar with Goulart's work will already know that if it's probability he's looking for, he'd better go to some other shop. Goulart hasn't the faintest interest in it; he's out to dazzle, amuse, and perhaps occasionally outrage, not to convince. (Besides, if one wishes to convince the reader of something, some sort of auctorial conviction is prerequisite, and if Goulart's got one, he hasn't thus far let it show.)

Goulart appears to believe that the funniest thing in the world is malfunctioning machinery; well, often he makes it so, but again there's no trick of this kind that can't be worked to death. All in all, I suggest

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that you treat this novel as though it were a short story collection, reading it in short takes. If you find that in doing this you lose the thread of the story, don't worry about it—reading it straight through at a sitting will leave you no better off in that department.

The peril of being a comedian is that each performer must become a specialist in his own idiosyncrasies, and that these just might repel as large a proportion of the audience as they attract. I find W. C. Fields uproarious; my wife actively dislikes him. (Or, as Oscar Wilde once put it more generally, "Where some people catch an effect, other people catch cold.") So it is with Goulart. I can't possibly tell you whether or not you'll like this book, only that it's worth a try.

R. A. Lafferty is another author with a well-earned reputation for idiosyncrasy—though in his case it is chiefly stylistic—and humor. And he is also a man whom I've found increasingly difficult to take at novel length, but that doesn't apply here, since the book under review now *is* a short story collection.

He differs from Goulart most markedly, however, in being a man of evident and deeply felt convictions, both metaphysical and moral. I have several times seen him described as a mystic, but this is a misnomer. Strictly, a mystic is a man in search of direct contact with his God by flensing himself of all his preconceptions, religious, intellectual, the lot. Lafferty's approach, religiously, is through the many centuries' accumulation of elaborations which is Roman Catholicism, and artistically, through the adoption of symbol systems of his own (as in the admirable FOURTH MANSIONS, the one Lafferty novel I thought completely successful). Nobody, of course, is required to agree with him, but despite the frequent surface sportiveness of his work, it is essential to take him seriously.

As for the stories here, three of the 16 appeared in F&SF, and almost all of the others in other sf magazines or original collections. Nevertheless, even if you do try to follow every issue of everything (are there any such readers, I wonder?) there are three you might easily have missed: "The Ugly Sea" from *The Literary Review* of Fairleigh Dickinson University, "Cliffs That Laughed" from the short-lived and miserably distributed *The Magazine of Horror*, and "Incased in Ancient Rind" from *Quark*, which had an even shorter life.

Some, like "Once on

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Aranea," are rather slight; some, like "Continued on Next Rock," are mysterious, disturbing, and possibly even profound. You're highly unlikely to enjoy them all, as I probably needn't warn you, but the overall level of performance is high indeed; it's certainly a book you should have.

But I will repeat my warning about highly idiosyncratic writers. Don't try to take in all 16 of these stories at one gulp, or you'll find a surfeit of sauce overwhelming the meat, of which latter there is a lot. Give each story its own chance.

THE BOOK OF SKULLS is the new Robert Silverberg's major attack on profundity to date. Significantly, it hasn't been published as science fiction or as any other kind of category work, but is labeled simply "a novel." However, since its central gimmick—not its theme, which goes much deeper—is a quest for immortality, I've arbitrarily decided that it qualifies as fantasy. Only just barely, though, so barely that I had to prop the decision up by the rationalization that a major Silverberg novel these days should be noticed in this column even if it turns out to be about James Polk. (Besides, he once favored me with the same kind of rationalization.)

This is a novel of character; the initial situation is provocative, ingenious and crucial to the theme, and there are plenty of incidents in these 222 densely printed pages, but of a plot in the usual sense there's hardly a trace. This, I realize, makes the book sound like an absurdly inflated short story, but nothing could be farther from the truth. As Silverberg has written it—and I wholly agree with his decision that it could have been written in no other way—decisive exterior events and resolutions cannot be allowed to happen, because they would be meaningless, until we know everything we need to know about the characters.

The situation, which contains the only element of fantasy in the novel, is exposed in bits and pieces except for one carefully delayed surprise, but quite quickly all the same; and I will do neither you nor the author any disservice by encapsulating it here. (In the usual maddening way, the writer of the flap copy also gives away the surprise, but luckily that doesn't turn out to matter either; it's admirable as plotting craftsmanship, but this is not a novel in which the unexpected twist in the surface story makes any real difference. As in any other good work, knowing in advance what's going to happen doesn't in any

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way dilute its real import, as any re-reader of any favorite book knows. I have some reservations on this point with THE BOOK OF SKULLS, as I mean to show, but they have nothing to do with the twist.)

So: Four college students have discovered a manuscript which announces the existence of a small brotherhood of immortals, now apparently living in a sort of monastery in the Arizona desert, which is willing to teach selected acolytes how to live forever. The conditions, of course, are stringent, and seem quite arbitrary. The candidates must appear in groups of four; only two can be given immortality; of the other two, one must be murdered by his friends and the other must commit suicide; and if any of the four quits before the full course is run, they will all die.

These four young men are sharply and closely differentiated, and each decides to join in the quest for completely and complexly different reasons, different degrees of faith in the reliability of the promise and the authenticity of the manuscript, and above all, almost totally different views of the very desirability of immortality, let alone what they would do with it if they got it. Most of the important events in the novel are changes in heart and mind as the four seek the monastery, find that it's real, and are taken in. The device Silverberg uses is that of divided viewpoint, in which each of the four candidates gets his own chance to advance the story and reveal himself in his own voice in individual chapters—42 in all, the extra two being allotted to the two survivors.

The training for immortality turns out to be an intensive course in every branch of classical yoga, some of which will doubtless prove titillating to readers unfamiliar with the ramifications of this most ancient of disciplines; but Silverberg has already provided enough titillations of the standard sort along the way so that he spends very little time lingering over these or any other elements of the course. They are mechanics and of no real importance. Instead, Silverberg introduces a part of the trial which, though it may also be part of classical yoga, was new to me—that isn't important—in which the basic theme of the novel, implicit from the beginning, comes powerfully to the fore and remains there until the end. Each man is required to confess to one of the others, privately, what he thinks to be the worst thing he has ever done, and why he thinks so.

These scarifying confrontations, which manage to be both raw and subtle at the same

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time, are artistically successful without exception—and, tragically, at the same time fail to do anything for the intensely moral core problem, which is: Which of the four *deserve* immortality if it's attainable (Silverberg never says that it is, and quite rightly), and by implication, who among all the rest of us would deserve it? On the least important level, the confrontations finally resolve the plot, by showing who must be killed, by whom he must be killed, and who must be willing to die by his own hand. Secondly, they show in depth and in detail and with complete consistency why the two who die were the inevitable victims, and why the murderer is who he is and had to be who he is.

What is not shown is the fundamental problem of just deserts, which is, after all, what the book is intended to be about. Though the sins confessed to are all in character, all abominable, and all confessed candidly and with nothing left out, I found it impossible to choose which I thought to be the worst one, and therefore impossible to decide which one took the most courage to confess. Still worse, the two survivors who are promised immortality—one of them the murderer—seem just as unworthy of it as the dead men, nor is there any reason to hope that the boon would do anything for them but make them more and more monstrously what they've already shown themselves to be, world without end.

Was this terrible ambiguity what Silverberg intended from the outset? If so, he's failed to realize it, for whether he meant it to show or not, his final sympathy is with the murderer, whose ultimate reasons for wanting eternal life are the coldest, most factitious, and most likely to break quickly into flinders of any of the four. And if the Brotherhood thinks this kind of candidate the most desirable survivor of their trials, then immortality has done nothing for them, either, except to turn them into an even worse pack of shits who ought to be killed on sight.

I think the novel a noble failure, but the failures may be mine, and the nobility of the attempt, and the frequency of its successes, can't be gainsaid. Please buy it at once, and read it repeatedly; you're sure to find it important, rewarding, and quite possibly better integrated than I'm able to see. Of one thing about it I'm quite sure: it's so unobtrusively, flawlessly written that even at its most puzzling it comes as perilously close to poetic beauty as any contemporary sf novel I've ever read, and Bob Silverberg, I hate you. □

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Here's a good, brisk tale about a starship that has mysteriously disappeared in deep space. Its author, new to F&SF, tells us that he is a 23-year-old VISTA Volunteer working with the Cook County Legal Assistance Foundation. "I got two degrees in journalism from Northwestern University and have done some newspaper work. But what I really like to do is write sf."

# A Peripheral Affair

## by GEORGE R. R. MARTIN

OUT ON THE PERIPHERY, where the human worlds grew few and far between, a spider's web stretched between the stars.

It was an old web, its strands heavy with stardust. The spiders that patrolled it were fat and rusty, and it had been nearly fifty years since last a fly was snared. But still the web endured, though it had long outlived its purpose.

The worlds the web entwined still bore witness to that purpose, still wore the radioactive scars that told of the ancient struggle that had seared through the Periphery. It had been there, a century earlier, that the expanding globe of the Allied Starsuns of Terra had first come into contact with the rival empire that called itself the KwanDellan BrotherWorlds. It had been there that the long, bitter KwanDellan War had been fought—to no conclusion.

The web had been spun in the uneasy armed peace that came in the wake of that war. Amid a chaotic jumble of Alliance worlds and independent colonies and the home planets of a dozen alien species, the starspiders wove a complex network to catch KwanDellan flies.

The web spinners were the scouts, the swift, lightly armed three-man scouts. They were the smallest starships of all. But they were not small. Each was a quarter-mile long, its decks crammed with sophisticated sensing equipment. In the early days, more then 200 of them prowled the Periphery.



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The spiders were the heavier ships, the cruisers and the battlewagons and the dreadnoughts. They were far fewer in number, but they carried the sting. Should a KwanDellan warship venture into the starweb, it would be they who caught and slew it.

But, for fifty years, there had been no warships to slay.

The hostile peace had lasted only a decade. There are many directions in space, and the region called the Periphery was just one frontier. Both Alliance and BrotherWorlds found easier expansion elsewhere.

Trade began as hostility waned. Human and KwanDellan discovered that they had a lot in common and that each had things the other wanted. A profitable business relationship ripened into friendship.

And meanwhile, in other sectors, new wars diverted Earth's attention.

The KwanDellans abandoned their own patrol web as soon as it was no longer needed. But human institutions are not so easily dismantled. The Periphery Defense Force remained. But it decayed.

Some ships were transferred away to fight in newer wars. Others were decommissioned and never replaced. Only a trickle of new ships were sent out to the Periphery to aid the aging starspiders.

The Periphery became a backwater. It remained a turbulent border region where a dozen species met and mingled and fleets of merchantmen plied their trade. But no longer was it the front lines. The explorers and the adventurers had moved on to greener planets and blacker skies.

And then one day a light flashed red at Alliance Sector Headquarters on New Victory. Somewhere out between the stars one of the strands in the web had broken.

Or so it seemed.

The monitor room was large and circular, and the holomap in its center was a pit of darkness. From the command catwalk built around the room the men on duty could look down into a mock void where the stars of the Periphery glittered in miniature, and smaller green pinpoints of light scuttled endlessly. The monitor panels themselves lined the walls up on the catwalk; banks of gleaming duralloy and steady green lights.

But now one light had gone red, and one of the pinpoints had blinked out down in the holomap.

Fleet Admiral Jefferson Mandel, the sector commandant, was notified at once, and he strode onto the catwalk almost eagerly. He was a short,

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bull-like man, with narrow dark eyes and a shining bald head. A row of multicolored ribbons danced on the chest of his dull black uniform while the silver galaxies of his rank spiraled on his shoulders.

His mouth was set grimly when he located the lieutenant in charge of the monitor room. "What is it?" he snapped.

"It's a red light, sir," the lieutenant replied. He pointed.

Admiral Mandel looked at him sternly. "I realize that, Lieutenant. What does it mean?"

The lieutenant shrugged. "It probably means the monitor computer is out of order. We're checking that now."

Mandel looked displeased at that. He glared at the red light, glared at the lieutenant, and put his hands on his hips. "Let's assume the computer is functioning properly. In that case, what does this red light mean?"

"In that case, sir, one of our scouts has been destroyed," the lieutenant answered calmly. "But that's hardly very likely."

"I'll be the judge of that," Mandel said. "Is there anything else that could account for this? Besides a malfunction, that is."

"No, sir," the lieutenant replied. "Not to my knowledge. The computer on every one of our starships is in constant linkage with our monitor computer here by subspace radio; so we know the location of each ship at all times. When a light goes red here, it means one of our ships has stopped signaling."

Mandel nodded. "Nothing else that could stop the signal besides an attack on the ship?"

"An attack wouldn't stop the signal," the lieutenant said. "Nothing short of total destruction would. The ship's computer is in the heart of a starship, heavily armored by duralloy plates and shielded by special force screens. Even the crew would have difficulty getting at it. And there are two independent backups in case of malfunction.

"No, sir," he concluded, shaking his head. "A ship's computer will continue to function and to signal as long as that ship is intact."

Mandel looked over at the red light again. "Then it's war," he said savagely.

The lieutenant looked aghast. "Sir!" he protested. "It's not—I mean—we don't—you can't—"

"Spit it out, Lieutenant," the admiral said sternly.

The lieutenant pulled himself together. "There's no cause to talk about war, sir. It can't be a KwanDellan attack. It *can't* be. We've been at peace with the KwanDellans for fifty years, sir. They'd have no reason to attack our ships.

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Besides, these scouts have elaborate sensors. That's why they're out there. If a KwanDellan fleet—or *any* kind of unauthorized vessel—had been detected, the crew would have plenty of time to notify us. All we have here is a signal suddenly cut off. Probably a flaw in the monitor computer or the monitor panel itself. We're checking that, sir."

"You're naive, Lieutenant," the admiral said. "You haven't seen war. I have. Maybe these KwanDellans disguised their ship as a friendly merchantman until they got in range. Or maybe they've discovered a new gimmick to blank our sensors. All sorts of possibilities, Lieutenant. And this incident stinks of KwanDellan treachery. Those bastards have never forgotten the licking we gave them, you know."

The lieutenant's mouth was hanging slightly open. "But—but, even so, sir, it might have been some sort of accident. An explosion in the warpdrives, or something. Or maybe the attacker wasn't a KwanDellan. If there *was* an attacker."

Mandel considered that. "Hmmmph," he said. "We'll be playing right into KwanDellan hands, but I suppose we had better check thoroughly first, before mobilizing."

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant said smartly, looking enormously relieved. He glanced over the catwalk railing, down at the holomap. "We can get a couple of scouts to the last location of the missing craft in an hour, sir."

"Scouts! Nonsense. The fleet is badly understrength as is, and I can't afford to lose any more ships if the attackers are still lurking out there. Let's send something that can fight back, Lieutenant. Something with a little firepower, like a battlewagon. Or even a dreadnought. Yes, a dreadnought."

The lieutenant studied the holomap again, his trained eyes making sense out of the tiny dancing lights with practiced ease. "The *Durandal* is at Last Landing, sir. And the *Mjolnir* is off Duncan's World. We can get either there in a day."

"Good," Mandel said. "Beam the *Mjolnir*. Give Garris a man-sized assignment for a change. Tell him to use all possible haste. And until we get his report, I want this place on full battle alert. The KwanDellan might be closing on New Victory even now."

In a small conference room on the Alliance Starship *Mjolnir*, First Officer Lyle Richey handed his captain a thick sheath of papers. "The reports you wanted, sir."

Captain John Garris accepted the papers and motioned

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his stocky, gray-haired second-in-command to a seat. Garris was the younger man of the two, tall and lean with gray eyes and thin lips and jet-dark hair cropped in a military crew cut.

He looked very unhappy at present. "Anything in here I should bother to read?" he asked Richey when the first officer was seated.

"Not much," Richey replied with a half shrug. "The missing ship was named the *Defiance*. Standard scoutship in all respects. It was new, though. One of the newest ships in the Periphery. That's unusual, but it doesn't explain anything. It makes instrument malfunction even less likely."

"Any experimental equipment aboard?" Garris asked.

"None," said Richey. "There is one thing, though. I don't know what it means, but it's something."

"Go ahead," Garris said.

Richey hesitated. "The ship was undermanned. These scouts are all designed to operate with three-man crews. They use eight-hour shifts; so in theory someone is always on duty. But most of the scouts out here on the Periphery have been running on two-man crews for years. We're just not getting the manpower we request, and the ship's computer takes care of most of the routine anyway.

"But this ship—this ship was even more undermanned than usual. Less than a week or so ago, one of its two crewmen got sick. He was detached when the scout neared Last Landing, and the ship was ordered to complete its patrol sweep with only one man, until a replacement could be assigned."

Garris leaned back in his swivel seat and considered that, looking thoughtful. "You're right," he said finally. "It's something, but it doesn't provide any answers. And there are an awful lot of questions."

He began to tick off questions on his fingers. "Number one," he said, "—if the scout was attacked, why didn't the crew report it? The computer would have detected an attacker. Number two—why didn't they, or he, or whatever, run away? A scout is faster than any warship. Number three—why would anyone attack a single scoutship anyway? To save a war fleet from detection? But they'd have to knock out more than one ship for that. Number four—if it was an attack, who did it? The KwanDellan? But why? That doesn't make sense. Number five—if it *wasn't* an attack, why did the ship stop signaling? What else could possibly destroy an armed and shielded starship in deep space? Number six—"

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"Enough," Richey interrupted, scowling. "I see what you mean. A lot doesn't fit together."

Garris nodded. "Admiral Mandel has a theory," he said, but his expression made it perfectly clear what he thought of the admiral's theory. "He thinks the KwanDellan hailed our ship openly, acted friendly, and then crept up into range and attacked. That answers some questions—like why the crew didn't run or call. But it doesn't explain the motivation for the attack. And theories that explain that don't explain the other things." He frowned.

After a pause, the captain leaned forward again, and flipped through the papers until he found the crew roster. "Which one of these men was aboard?" he asked.

"Hollander," Richey replied. "Craig Hollander, junior crewman."

"Request a facsimile of the file on the man," Garris ordered. "Maybe that will tell us something. And have someone locate his next of kin and inform them that he's missing."

The first officer nodded, rose, and saluted briskly. After he had left, Garris continued to turn the puzzle over in his mind.

The captain knew full well what Mandel expected him to find, evidence of a KwanDellan attack. Nothing would please the admiral more. It was common knowledge around the fleet that Mandel was an aging incompetent who had been sent to the Periphery to keep him out of the way. But a war—with him in the front lines—might wipe out some of the admiral's past mistakes and catapult him back into Earth's good graces.

Garris, on the other hand, didn't need a war. He was already indecently young to be wearing a captain's star clusters. And the *Mjolnir*, although a battle-scarred relic, was still a dreadnought, with awesome firepower and a crew of more than a hundred. Every captain in the fleet who didn't command a dreadnought wanted to—and Garris already had one. The Periphery wasn't exile for him. It was another step on the way up.

But there were still things in his way. Like Mandel, who despised him for his youth and his success and was doing everything in his power to block Garris' further advancement.

If he could crack this thing—and crack it in a way that made the admiral look foolish—it could only help, Garris figured. Mandel would probably be sent off to still more distant exile. And he, Garris, would get a promotion. Perhaps a transfer to one of the

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new dreadnoughts, engaging in real exploration.

The captain smiled faintly and began to pore over the papers that Richey had left. This was too good an opportunity to pass up.

The service file on Craig Hollander was delivered to Garris hours later while he sat on the bridge supervising the *Mjolnir's* methodical sweep through the last known location of the *Defiance*. He turned to it with interest.

There was a color photograph of Hollander on the file cover, showing a young man of medium height with a dark sun tan that spoke of birth under a sun harsher than Earth's. His hair, so blond that it was almost white, was worn long and combed forward so it fell across his forehead to his eyebrows. His eyes were bright blue, and he was grinning crookedly at the camera, which was rather unusual for a fleet mug shot.

Garris studied the picture briefly, then flipped open the file to begin going over its contents. But he had hardly glanced at the first paper when he was interrupted.

"We've got something, sir," the crewman manning the sensory monitors reported from across the bridge. "Not a ship. Debris of some sort."

Garris laid the file atop his command console and promptly forgot about it. "Hook on with tractors and pull it aboard," he ordered. He turned to the communications officer. "Get me the landing deck."

"Yes, sir," the comm man replied. The huge viewscreen that filled the entire forward wall of the bridge flickered, and the starscape it had been showing vanished. Instead, the tired features of the third officer took form.

"We've got some debris that might be from the *Defiance*," Garris told him. "They're bringing it aboard now with tractors. When they get it inside, spread it out on the landing deck and go over it carefully. Check for radioactivity and laser damage. And for any remains of the crew, of course."

The man nodded. "Right, sir. Will do."

"I'll be down shortly," Garris added. "I hope the junk will tell you something." He turned and nodded to the comm man, and the viewscreen went dark. An instant later, the starscape reappeared.

After turning over the bridge to Richey, Garris proceeded down to the landing deck. Like any starship, the *Mjolnir* was strictly a deep-space vessel. It was never meant to land, and so it carried in its capacious belly a small fleet of landing craft.

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Even the smallest starships—the scouts—never entered a planetary atmosphere, although they had only two small landing boats. The landing deck always adjoined a huge airlock, which was where the debris would be pulled aboard.

It was already spread out in a clear space between the boats when Garris arrived. A ring of crewmen encircled it, each carrying a sensing instrument. The third officer stood by and watched them work.

Garris looked over the small mountain of metal and plastic doubtfully. There didn't seem to be as much of it as there should be. Moreover, it all looked like electronic gear of some sort. And nothing looked damaged. He turned to the third officer with a puzzled frown. "Well?" he asked.

The third officer looked equally puzzled. "I've got them checking it over again," he said. "The first readings don't make much sense, sir. No radioactivity, no signs of fusing, no damage. Nothing."

"Is that *all*? I thought there would be a lot more. A scoutship is pretty big, after all."

"That's another thing, sir. We've got several tons of debris here, but, as you say, that's not nearly enough. The *Defiance* wasn't just blasted apart, by the looks of it. Most of it is just gone. Vaporized. But you *can't* vaporize duralloy, sir. And if you could, there would be some sort of vapor traces about. Have we detected anything like that?"

"No," Garris said. He looked thoughtful. "Look," he said, "when you've finished your recheck, I want your men to go over this junk and figure out exactly what it is. Or what it used to be." He threw a last scowl at the remains of the *Defiance*, then stalked back to the bridge.

Garris wasn't quite sure what he had expected to find when the snarled debris had been identified and pieced together. But whatever it was, it wasn't what he found. He listened to the third officer's report with growing amusement and immediately got on a beam to Admiral Mandel's headquarters at New Victory.

Mandel frowned out of the viewscreen eagerly. "What was it?" he asked. "KwanDellan attack?"

Garris shook his head. "No, sir. Not an attack at all, from what we can determine."

"Not an attack? Then why did the ship stop signaling? Explain yourself, Captain."

"Well, we located what's left of the *Defiance*. There isn't much. But what there is hasn't been damaged at all. It's simply been—discarded."

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Mandel didn't like that idea. "Discarded? What is that supposed to mean?"

Garris waved the sheet of paper with the third officer's report. "We've identified the debris, Admiral. We know exactly what it was. We've found the ship's computer and a ton or so of sensing instruments and most of the scout's armament. And that's all, sir. It was discarded. Just disconnected and set loose in space. There's no remains from the warpdrives or the hull or the life support system. Nothing at all."

Mandel's jaw quivered. "What does this *mean*, dammit!"

"It means, sir, that your scoutship wasn't destroyed at all. It was stolen."

"STOLEN! STOLEN! How the hell do you steal a starship, Captain? Just tell me that."

Garris shrugged. "I don't know, sir. But that's clearly what happened. The ship stopped signaling simply because the ship's computer was disconnected. The *Defiance* was hijacked, not destroyed."

Mandel, red-faced and glowering, considered that for a moment. He and Garris both knew that he was in serious trouble. He had put the Periphery and the Periphery Defense Force on combat alert, and Earth was going to want to know why. His reasons had better be good.

"All right," the admiral said at last. "So the KwanDellan didn't attack our ship. Instead they captured it. Just as bad. Still an act of war."

"But *how*, sir?" Garris said. "They couldn't just ask to send a boarding party over. The crewman would have been most suspicious. Starships don't pay each other social visits in deep space."

Mandel smiled. "Maybe they pretended they were a distressed vessel. When the *Defiance* attempted rescue, the trap closed." He made a clenching motion with his fist.

"Fleet regulations require a pilot to report if he goes to the rescue of a distressed ship, sir," Garris pointed out. "Besides, the *Defiance* stayed on course right until its signal went out, according to your monitors, sir."

"Well, then, the KwanDellan must just have captured the ship by force."

Garris shook his head. "Admiral, the crewman could have run from an attacker. And he certainly would have had time to notify sector headquarters if someone was trying to capture his ship. Moreover, a scout has *some armament*. It could have resisted capture. In which case, we would have found some signs of a battle—

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debris from the attacker, or something."

Mandel was starting to lose control again. "All right, young man," he said, putting a sneer in the 'young.' "If you're so smart, *you* explain it!"

"I can't sir," Garris admitted. "I've been toying with a dozen different theories, and none make sense. The only thing I can think of is an accident. Something happened to the crewman. Incapacitated him in some way, so he couldn't run or report or resist."

"Yes," said Mandel, seizing on Garris' explanation eagerly. "And *then* the KwanDellan attack came—"

"Only that doesn't work, either," Garris interjected. "Too many coincidences. The KwanDellan would have no way of knowing that this one ship, out of our entire fleet, was crippled. And the odds are equally astronomical against someone else blundering on a dead *Defiance* and capturing it."

But this time Mandel was adamant. "No, Captain. You may be right about the odds. But nothing else makes sense. I'm ordering a mobilization. Proceed to Duncan's World at once. We'll issue those bastards an ultimatum. Return the *Defiance* at once—or we move against them."

The viewscreen went dark suddenly. A dead silence swept over the bridge, broken only by the whirring of the instruments. Then someone spoke. "My God," he said, in a soft whisper.

Garris realized his mouth was hanging open, and shut it. "You heard the admiral," he said to the helmsman. "Set a course for Duncan's World. All possible speed." Then he rose from his seat before the command console and beckoned to Richey to follow.

They retreated to the conference room. Once the door had slid shut safely behind them, Garris exploded.

"I never expected anything like that," he said. "Mandel is worse than I thought. There's no telling what damage he'll do. He's determined to foment a war with the KwanDellan."

"That's a very serious charge, sir," Richey reminded him. "I think it's best if I forget I heard you say that." He sat down while Garris strode over to a wall and punched for drinks. They appeared a moment later.

Garris joined Richey at the conference table, handed him a drink, sat down, and emptied his glass with a quick snap of his wrist. "This is crazy," he said. "Crazy. Nothing fits. It *can't* be the KwanDellan. It just can't be. For one thing, what possible motivations could they

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have? Why capture an Alliance starship? It was a standard model, a bit improved but nothing revolutionary. What could they hope to gain? There was no experimental equipment on board, unless there's something I'm not being told."

He frowned and stopped to consider that possibility, then discarded it. "No," he said. "Impossible. It doesn't make sense."

"What if it weren't the KwanDellan?" Richey put in hesitantly. "What if it were some species we've never encountered. Out conducting their own explorations. An Alliance starship would be a novelty to them. Perhaps they'd capture it to see how it works and figure out the level of our technology."

"Unknown aliens? Maybe, but—no, that doesn't work either." Garris shook his head vigorously. "The crewman would have reported it if he detected a vessel of unknown design."

"The accident you hypothesized," said Richey. "He was out. Dead, or unconscious."

"The coincidence involved would be mind-boggling," Garris said. "And, if these aliens of yours wanted a ship for study, why discard the armament and the sensors and the computer? Wouldn't those be the parts that would interest them the most? Especially if they're hostile—they'd want to take our weapons apart piece by piece, not throw them out into space."

Richey gave up with a shrug. "I don't know, then. I can't explain it."

"Neither can I," said Garris. He waved the first officer away. "Go take charge of the bridge. I'm going to stay down here and do some hard thinking. I've got to come up with some answers before Mandel ignites a war just to gratify his ego."

Garris went to his cabin and thought through most of his sleep shift. It got him precisely nowhere. When he finally returned to the bridge, the *Mjolnir* was four hours out of Duncan's World, and the situation was getting tense.

A stack of reports was sitting on his command console. He read them one by one, starting from the top. Admiral Mandel had beamed the KwanDellan regional capital on ArsashNag and had demanded that the *Defiance* be returned. The local BrotherWorlds administrator had been baffled at first, then amused, and finally indignant. The session had ended with the admiral shouting threats.

Mandel had issued orders for the Periphery Defense Force to abandon its detection web, and

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reform into two battle fleets. The admiral was still unwilling to risk an out-and-out attack on the KwanDellan, but he wanted to set up blockades of the two nearest BrotherWorlds colonies. Since the KwanDellan had no warships in the region, it seemed like a safe maneuver.

The bottom report wasn't about Mandel at all, which Garris found to be relieving. The report said that Hollander, the crewman late of the *Defiance*, had no living relatives. But he did have a girl on Last Landing. Fleet personnel had tried to locate her to break the news, but without success. It was reported that she had gone off-planet, although she left no forwarding address.

That was unfortunate, Garris thought. She'd get the news eventually no matter where she went, of course. But there was no telling how, or when. A fleet representative might have been able to break things more gently. Terrible timing, it seemed—

He frowned in midthought. An odd suspicion had crossed his mind. He looked around for that file on Hollander he had intended to read once.

It was still on the console, covered by a pile of more recent documents. Garris brushed them aside and leaned back to read the file.

He smiled a bit as he perused the first page. Then the smile widened to a grin, and he chuckled softly to himself. He flipped through it page by page, still grinning.

Around page four, the grin faded and was replaced by a look of concern. He continued to read with mounting horror.

When he finished, he slapped the file down on the console savagely, straightened, and bellowed across the bridge at the startled comm man. "Get me Mandel. At once," he yelled.

The admiral finally appeared on the *Mjolnir* viewscreen, harried and angry. "I hope this is important, Garris. I don't have time to argue with you. Coordinating a fleet in battle is a full-time job."

"You're making a terrible mistake, sir," Garris said. "Stop the mobilization. I've figured it all out. The KwanDellan have nothing to do with it."

"Nonsense," Mandel snarled. He pointed a finger at the screen. "I warn you, Garris, I won't tolerate any insubordination on your part. I'm the commandant in this sector, and I'll make the decisions."

The admiral turned as if to signal to end the connection. Garris yelped loudly and shot from his seat. "Sir! I've got new evidence."

Mandel grimaced. "Very well. But make it fast. What new evidence?"

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"The crewman—the *only* crewman—on board the *Defiance* was named Craig Hollander," Garris said simply.

"Is that supposed to mean something, Garris? You waste valuable time!" He started to gesture again and was stopped by another screech of protest from the captain.

Garris turned to his console, snared the Hollander file, extracted a sheet of paper, and held it up to the viewscreen. "Look at this, sir," he said. "Hollander was inducted. When he took his physical, he had to fill out a medical history."

He rattled the sheet and pointed to a row of boxes that occupied four columns. Every box was checked in red. "Look," he repeated. "Hollander claimed every disease from hay fever to Swampworld slimerot."

Garris put that back into the file and yanked out another sheet. "That's not all," he said. "Here's another form he filled out at induction. Where it asks for religion, he put 'Reform Druid.' And down where it asks for occupation, he's answered 'Freelance Assassin,' with 'former shepherd' in parentheses."

Mandel was still frowning, but he was listening. "What of it?" he said. "The man was obviously an insubordinate clown, but why does that matter? Even if he sold out to the KwanDellan when they attacked him, that still doesn't excuse the attack."

"No, no, *NO!*" Garris said. "The KwanDellan *didn't* attack, sir. That name—Craig Hollander. Doesn't that mean anything to you, admiral?"

"No. Should it?"

Garris held up the file so the admiral could see Hollander's photograph. "Yes," he said. "It should. Hollander was inducted about a year ago. He spent the first six months of his term in the New Victory stockade. For gross insubordination. It's all in his file."

But Mandel was no longer listening. He was staring at the photograph, white-faced. "Yes," he said. "I recognize it. I was conducting an inspection of the new recruits and—and—"

"And he was one of them," Garris continued. "And he was wearing his hair like *this.*" The captain jabbed at the photo. The bald admiral's aversion to long hair was a fleet legend. "And you stopped when you saw him, and said, 'Soldier, you'd better have a good reason for hair like that.' "

Mandel nodded. "And he said he did. And I asked him what it was. And he—and he—" the admiral purpled with remembered rage.

Garris supplied the line from Hollander's file. "And he said

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that he wore his hair long to hide the obscene words he wrote on his forehead. Sir."

Mandel looked as though he was going to explode. "They let *that* man out on a starship! I'll have somebody's scalp for this. I told them to shoot him." He swore. Then he stopped suddenly. "But this still doesn't explain anything. I don't—"

"It explains *everything*," Garris said. "Hollander stole your starship, sir. He *stole* it. Himself. Alone. For his own reasons and use. He was alone in the ship, without supervision. He crawled up the repair tube and disconnected the ship's brain. He took it apart and jettisoned it so he couldn't be traced. He also got rid of armament and sensing equipment he didn't need. And then he lit out."

"With several million dollars worth of starship," Mandel said in a half snarl. "He probably intends to attack and conquer some helpless primitive planet somewhere and make himself a king. Or maybe go in for deep-space piracy."

"No, sir. That's not it. He got rid of most of his armament, sir. Besides, that's not his style. He's converted the *Defiance* into a merchantman, sir. He got rid of all that equipment to give him *room*. For freight, I'm willing to bet. He built himself cargo holds."

Mandel had suddenly gone ashen, as some of the implications of what Garris was saying hit him. "The attack," he said. "The mobilization. I'll have to cancel them at once. And Earth—" There was a note of sick whining in his voice. He was finished and he knew it.

Then his face hardened again. "Find him, Garris," he ordered. "Find this Hollander character and crucify him. Blast him out of space if you must. But get him. You understand? GET HIM!"

Garris understood, all right. He understood too well. As the screen went dark, he slumped back into his command chair and dropped the Hollander file in disgust.

The admiral wanted revenge. Preferably on Hollander, who had just demolished what was left of Mandel's alleged career. But Garris would do as a surrogate. So Garris gets the assignment to find Hollander. And the admiral is sure to get *someone*—

The captain sighed and looked over at the comm man. "Wake up Richey," he said. "I want him up here."

The first officer, yawning, reported to the bridge a few minutes later. "What's up, sir?" he asked.

"The war has been canceled due to circumstances beyond our admiral's control," Garris

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said dryly, ignoring the shocked stares and repressed chortling of his bridge crew. "Turns out Hollander stole the *Defiance* and ran off with it. We've got to find him, the admiral says."

"Oh," said Richey, taking everything in quickly. "How do we do that?"

"I was hoping you'd know," Garris said. "He could be anywhere."

Richey thought for a moment. "No, he couldn't," he said finally. "He'd have to head out. If he went back into Alliance space, one of the other scouts in the detection network would've picked him up."

"That's right," said Garris. His mind was beginning to function again. "He'd head into KwanDellan territory. They don't bother to patrol any more; so no one would trace him."

The captain straightened in his seat. "But he couldn't just start trading with a stolen Alliance scoutship. Someone would notice." He remembered something else. "And then there's his girl. She's left Last Landing. Obviously they've got a rendezvous planned somewhere—he couldn't come back to pick her up without being detected. They must have planned the whole thing when the other crewman was detached—that was at Last Landing, too, if I recall correctly."

He nodded to himself. "Give me a starmap on the viewscreen," he said loudly to the comm man. "The Periphery and neighboring space."

The map flashed into reality. Garris studied it intently for a few minutes. Then he looked over at the helmsman. "Set course for Rendlaine," he ordered. "Max speed."

"Why Rendlaine?" Richey asked.

Garris turned to face him. "Hollander's converting his ship to a merchantman," he said. "But he needs pros to finish the job. And to disguise the ship's lines, so it won't be spotted as an Alliance scout every time he heads into Alliance space. But the *Defiance* is a starship, not a system boat. It can't set down. So he needs a planet with orbital space docks."

He pointed at the map. "Rendlaine is perfect. It's a Free Colony, a human world, but not part of the Alliance. It's got extensive spaceport facilities in orbit and plenty of skilled workers. It's also got no scruples. Hollander can get rid of some more of his military hardware, pay for the overhaul, and still turn a nice profit.

"The Rendlainese will probably give him a registration to boot. They won't care if the ship's stolen, as long as it pays taxes. And he can pick up a cargo there."

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Richey, looking at the starmap, nodded in agreement. "Yes," he said, "makes sense. Rendlaine's outside the Periphery proper, but fairly close. And the most direct route skirts Alliance space and goes right through the KwanDellan globe." He frowned. "A good guess, Captain. But you'll never catch him."

"Why not?" said Garris.

"The *Defiance* is a scout," the first officer said. "It's lighter and faster than the *Mjolnir*. And he's got a big head start. He'll beat you there by a week and be long gone when you arrive."

"No," Garris said, shaking his head. "I don't think so. They work fast on Rendlaine when the money's right—but converting a scout to a merchantman will still take time. And there's something else—"

"Yes?"

"His girl. If we had time to investigate, we'd discover that she booked passage from Last Landing to Rendlaine, I'd wager. Probably under an assumed name. But that doesn't matter. She'll be traveling in a commercial passenger boat, making several other stops. Hollander will have to wait for her. Only the *Mjolnir* will beat her there." He grinned.

Richey looked impressed. "You know," he said, "I think you're right, Captain. We may just do it."

"We *will* do it," Garris said confidently, picturing the promotion it would bring him. "I almost pity the poor guy. Almost. But not quite."

They caught them red-handed. When the *Mjolnir* arrived at Rendlaine a little over two weeks later, the *Defiance* was still tied up at an orbital repair dock, undergoing a major overhaul. That the ship in question was the *Defiance* there was no doubt. The Alliance markings on the hull had been painted over and replaced by strange red-and-white stripes the like of which Garris had never seen. But the lines were still those of a late model Alliance scoutship, although they were rapidly undergoing revision.

Yes, they caught them red-handed.

Only the Rendlainese wouldn't let them do anything about it.

The Rendlainese official was polite, but firm. "For the last time, Captain, we will not surrender the ship in question to you. Nor will we allow you to take its crew into custody."

Garris fumed. "But it's a stolen Alliance starship," he said. "It *belongs* to us."

"The ship you speak of is a registered Rendlainese trader.

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The commander is a Brish'dir named Tewghel-kei. Not even a human." The Rendlainese official shook his head. "You have no proof of your charges. And you must admit, they are outrageous charges. Stealing an Alliance military vessel. I mean, really, Captain."

Garris glowered menacingly at the viewscreen. "You realize that I could take the stolen ship by force, if necessary? I remind you that the *Mjolnir* is an Alliance dreadnought."

The official only smiled at that. "And I remind you that Rendlaine is protected by treaties with the KwanDellan, the Brish'diri, and the Mira-ashians. Not to mention the other Free Colonies. We will not be bullied, Captain Garris. Not even by an Alliance dreadnought. You will take no action against the ship in question without our permission. And you will not obtain that permission unless you prove your charges."

"If you'd get off your duff and come out to orbit and *look* at the *Defiance*, you'd have all the proof you need," Garris said. "She's an Alliance scoutship. You can tell by looking."

"That is not proof. Perhaps someone liked the design of your scouts and built a ship along similar patterns. Stranger things have been known to happen."

"All right, then," Garris said. "Then let us look at the ship's registration papers. There should be proof there."

"A ship's registration papers are confidential documents. Neither you nor I may examine them without her captain's permission. Only authorized officials of the Rendlainese fleet and trade commission have free access to the information they contain."

The Rendlainese shook his head one last time. "Perhaps you should contact the skipper of the ship in question, Captain Garris. Perhaps you'll get permission. That's the only thing I can suggest. Good day."

The screen went dark. Garris slapped his command console in frustration, and winced at the force of the blow. He turned to Richey. "He knows."

The first officer shrugged. "Of course he knows. But he's not about to let you do anything. The Rendlainese think the whole affair is terribly amusing. These Free Colonists have odd ideas of what's funny."

"Where do you think they got this Brish'dir?" Garris asked.

"On Rendlaine. The *Defiance* is a three-man ship. Hollander had himself and his girl friend; so he hired a third crewman from some other boat. An alien, to confuse things.

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Made him nominal captain for purposes of registration. All very neat."

"Yes," Garris agreed. "Very. This Hollander has a devious mind. I'm beginning to understand how it works, and it scares me."

Richey tried to look sympathetic. "Whatever you do, you'd better do it soon. Work on the *Defiance* is nearly complete, and a cargo is being taken on. Trade goods, according to the man we bribed. Hollander is evidently going to try wheeling and dealing on his own, instead of just lugging freight. Moreover, we also have reports that a Terran female was aboard the last shuttle up to that orbital dock."

Garris gave an exaggerated scowl and faced the viewscreen. "Get me the *Defiance*," he snapped. "Or whatever it's called now."

The ship was evidently not called anything at present. But it responded to the *Mjolnir's* signals anyway. The hairless, bullet-shaped, and gray-skinned features of a squat Brish'dir took shape on the viewscreen.

Garris came right to the point. "Sir," he said, "the ship you are in is a stolen scout of the Allied Starsuns of Terra. You are making yourself an accomplice to a serious crime by joining her crew. You put yourself in danger. I must demand that you surrender the *Defiance* at once."

"You must be Captain Garris," the Brish'dir said politely in a bass rumble. "The Rendlainese have told me all about you. I'm afraid you are mistaken. This ship is not your *Defiance*. I am its master, not your escaped Terran."

"If you have nothing to hide, then I ask that you release your ship's registration papers to us," Garris said.

"I am sorry, Captain Garris," the Brish'dir began gravely. "I cannot give credence to—" Then suddenly he stopped, and looked to the side. As if he were talking to someone out of viewscreen range.

The viewer's sound cut off suddenly, and it appeared that the Brish'dir was arguing with someone offscreen. Finally he turned back with the alien equivalent of a shrug. The sound came back on.

"Very well," he said. "I will comply with your request, Captain Garris. To prove that I have nothing to hide, as you say. But my ship departs soon, in hours, and there is much work. I must request that you do not bother me again."

He vanished from the viewscreen. Garris turned to Richey. "He didn't want us to see the registration," the captain said. "He was overruled. By Hollander, I'll wager."

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"Why?" said Richey.

"I'm not sure. Perhaps there's nothing damaging in the papers." He smiled. "Or maybe that's what Hollander thinks. But I think he's slipped. There'll be something, somewhere. Something that will betray him. Something that will show the commander of that ship is a human, not an alien. And, if we find it, the Rendlainese will *have* to listen to us." He whirled towards communications. "Get me Rendlaine again and demand those documents."

But the Rendlainese were still adamant. Yes, they said, Garris could see the papers if the captain had authorized their release. But they had not yet been notified of the release. So Garris would have to wait.

Garris waited. Waited and thought. And something dawned on him, hours later.

He knew how Hollander's mind worked. He'd read those forms. The man was a gambler, a clown, a joker. He'd take a chance and let Garris see his papers just for the hell of it, all right. That fitted. But he'd wait until the last minute to release them, gambling that Garris couldn't find anything until he was gone.

And he'd leave the system laughing, knowing that he'd never be found again. Space is vast, and Hollander had no reason to confine himself to the Periphery. Tramp traders such as he would be lived erratic lives among the stars, and the number of planets out there was dizzying.

Garris swore. Swore and waited. And started thinking about the possible giveaways in the papers. So he'd be ready to act quickly.

About seven hours after Garris had beamed the Brish-'dir, the crewman on the sensing instruments looked up. "The *Defiance* is leaving, sir," he reported.

"Hook your sensors on tight," Garris said. "Keep track of it as long as you can. Keep all weapons systems trained on it as long as it's in range." The *Mjolnir* couldn't catch a scout, but Garris could stop it with threats and maybe cripple it if he got his evidence in time.

The comm man looked up. "Rendlaine on beam, sir," he said. "They're faxing up the documents you requested."

Garris grinned savagely. He had Hollander figured out perfectly. No sane man would take a stupid, unnecessary risk like this. But if Hollander had been sane, he never would have had the unmitigated gall to dream of swiping a starship.

"Let me see the documents as soon as they're ready," he ordered. It was going to be tight. The *Defiance* was fast,

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and there were a lot of documents coming over.

Moreover, the important ones came last. The early pages were useless—simple things like name of ship, name of owner, class of ship, type of registration. There would be scant evidence there, Garris had decided. He gave those sheets only a quick impatient glance as each was rushed over to him.

Then the important sheets began to come in. The ones where Garris expected to find something. He examined them eagerly, page by page.

The crew roster. Three crewmen, one Brish'dir male, one Terran male, one Terran female. But Hollander and his girl had used assumed names. No proof there. Mixed crews were common.

The ship's specs. Close to those of an Alliance scoutship. But not close enough. Hollander had had alterations made. No proof there.

Ship's planet of manufacture. That was Garris' brightest hope. If Hollander had listed an Alliance world, he was through. Fleet-design ships were not built for civilian use in Alliance worlds. But instead, Hollander had listed a Free Colony. It could be checked and disproved, but not until the quarry was long gone.

Garris shuffled through paper after paper, searching for the giveaway. That damned Hollander was such a joker. Surely, somewhere, he'd have blundered. His very frivolous nature would demand it. But there was nothing, nothing.

The sensor man called over. "Captain, the *Defiance* is almost out of range. And it's going into warpdrive."

Garris looked up, swore, looked back, shuffled some more.

"Gone, sir," the crewman said a minute later.

The captain flung the papers to the floor in disgust. He'd lost. And he knew damn well he'd pay. Mandel would blame him for letting Hollander escape. And he wouldn't get a promotion again until the fugitive starship was caught. Which meant never.

Richey picked up the discarded documents and walked across the bridge to console Garris. "Tough luck," he said. "But they can't blame you."

"No?" said Garris. "Just you watch." He took the papers Richey was holding, and began to sort them into some semblance of order. Mandel would want to see them, of course.

Finally he had them arranged according to page number. He started to set them aside. Then he happened to glance at page one. He paused.

Page one, entry one, name of

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starship. Right under the Rendlainese seal, neatly filled in by hand.

Garris had a brief vision of red and white stripes. He remembered the custom, strange to his military mind, that said the commander of a starship always chose its name. He remembered that the commander of the stolen ship was supposed to be an alien.

He remembered how page one had arrived first. How he had given it a quick glance. How he had tossed it aside.

Captain John Garris, commandant of the dreadnought *Mjolnir*, sat back in his seat before the command console and took very firm hold of himself. It did not become the dignity of a starship captain to be seen screaming before his bridge crew.

Meanwhile, out beyond the Rendlainese system, the captain of the *Good Ship Lollipop* grinned and set a course for the stars.

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"You know, Larry, with a smart lawyer you could make a lot of money!"



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A very short and very powerful new piece from Barry Malzberg, whose forthcoming novels include IN THE ENCLOSURE, Avon, HEROVIT'S WORLD, Random House and THE MEN INSIDE, Lancer.

# Outside

## by BARRY N. MALZBERG

NOW THEY ARE PUTTING the nails into him. It is a painful thing to witness, but I have committed myself to watch it through to the end, and in any event the tape is in black and white (I could not have borne full color), which provides necessary distancing. "Forgive them Father," he says, "they know not what they do," and so on and so forth as the tape flash-cuts to the sky.

When the cameras focus on him again, he is in the high place suffering, his body distended in the classic position; and although the angle is tight, I can see the suggestion, toward the periphery, of the thieves. Everything is very much in order and as I have remembered it, and as I watch the screen, I know that I have gotten through the worst in fairly good shape, and from now on, from now in it will be downhill. Most of the downers or flights of panic, I have been told, occur through the earlier sequences; those able to stomach these find the Crucifixion an anticlimax. "Tonight I will be with thee in paradise," he says, or something like that, and there is a long hold on his face, a hold which turns into a slow pan of the landscape, and then the film dissolves. The screen turns black before me; slowly fluorescence fills the room, and I rise slowly from my seat to see that the attendants have not left. They have been here all the time, doubtless watching the film with me, surrounding my seat in the otherwise empty theater. I think vaguely of how it must be for them to see this one film, two or three or four times a day for all of their working life, and feel a touch of sympathy. . .until I remind myself that for them it can be little more than a job and they must have long since been anesthetized to the film and to much else.



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"Come along," the tallest and strongest of them, the apparent leader says, and I feel their arms upon me once more, that clasp already as familiar as the sigh of my own breath; and I am taken from the theater down a corridor into another room where the Interrogator sits; and as I confront him, it all comes back to me, everything (how could I have shielded myself against that recollection?); and I reel in place, wondering if I will be able to bear the confrontation. "How did he bear it?" the Interrogator asks.

"Well," the attendant clasping me says, "he seemed to show some nervousness during the earlier sections, but he watched the last two thirds calmly."

"I didn't," I say. "I was terribly shaken. I—"

"Quiet!" the Interrogator shouts and then in a softer tone, "you'll get your chance. Were there any indications of remorse?" he asks the attendant.

"No."

"Was there observable any change of facial expression—"

"Not that we could see," the attendant says, and the others nod, and the four of them step back from me, one pace, bow toward the Interrogator, and then at a signal from him turn and leave the room, the click of the lock resounding. I stand before the Interrogator alone and, then at a motion of his, drop into the seat facing him across the desk. There is no appeal from the signals of the Interrogator. The only hope with the Investigation, I have been told from many sources, is to cooperate completely and to show an emotional reaction toward the film, but how can I feign an emotional reaction when essentially there is none? I am no faker. I cannot conceal my true feelings. This is the major reason for my being in this position.

"No remorse," the Interrogator says. "The statement is that you showed no remorse." He is a thin man with hard eyes and dreadful features, but I try not to think of him in the personal sense. He is merely the Interrogator.

"I did," I said. "I do. It's impossible for anyone to state—"

"We don't like to do this," he says. "The procedure is not a happy one, but it is one developed painfully over many decades as a means of judgment. If there were a better way, one less painful, it would have been utilized. It has taken us a long time to have devised a test as rigorous and fair as this, and we cannot forsake it, even for all its difficulties. You were able to watch it to the end."

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"What else could I have done?" I ask. "I was seated alone in there, surrounded by attendants. I could not have fled."

"Did you try?"

"No," I say after a pause. "It seemed hopeless."

"It seemed hopeless," repeats the Interrogator. He seems to smile. "That is precisely the point. You did not think to try to leave. You wanted to watch it."

"I didn't want to watch."

"Yes, you did or you would have tried to leave. Or have covered your eyes or have slipped under the seat or have fainted. Many have fainted."

"I was told that you must watch it through."

"By whom?" the Interrogator says. "By your associates?" Now his smile is genuine.

There is no way to answer this. I sink in the seat, as I did not in the theater, and shake my head. "I thought you had to watch it through."

"No, you don't," the Interrogator says. He turns in place and looks at the wall, then back at me. "That was your mistake."

"I didn't know. I didn't know."

"You are a cold man," the Interrogator says. "A man without remorse, a man without feeling, a man who can watch a film of the Crucifixion without emotional reaction. That film is genuine, you know. You have no idea at what costs we were able to send the cameras back in time to capture it. Did you think it was a reconstruction or enactment?"

"No."

"No," the Interrogator says. "Of course you didn't. It was real, and you accepted the fact that it was real, and you were able to watch it, and you say that your associates had told you that this was the condition of the test." He shakes his head, slaps a hand on the desk, then opens and shuts a drawer with a sound of finality. "You know what we're going to have to do now, don't you?" he says.

"Yes," I say. I have read the texts and do know. There is no way in which I can deny this.

"We're sorry. But we've been able to come this long and far now only because of the test, and the test is real, and its outcome cannot be defied. I'm sorry," the Interrogator says. "I'm sorry."

"Please," I say. "I'll watch it again. Give me one more chance."

"There are no second chances," the Interrogator says. "Our Lord never had a second chance." He reaches underneath his desk and presses a button. I hear machinery in the walls, the wicker of cabinets opening, the roof opens to let in the sun. We

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are in a high place.

"I'm sorry," the Interrogator says again, "truly sorry," and then he vanishes (he must have been, from the beginning, a machine), leaving behind him the last thing he says to me, the last thing I hear, "but it is only from such as you that we can find the proper Chosen."

And then, as if in a dream, I feel the ring of nails into my flesh.

Hear the whine of cameras.

## On Advertising, Especially Cigarettes

We've received a few letters of complaint from readers who find cigarette advertising offensive and who do not like the prominent position of the ad. Although we have answered each complaint individually, we feel we should explain our position to all readers.

First, it has always been the policy of the magazine to accept all advertising, unless we have reason to believe that it is fraudulent or misleading or in bad taste. There is such a thing as the "freedom to advertise," and the trouble with censoring or turning down ads (like anything else) is where do you stop? Should we also ban liquor ads? Automobile ads? Cigarette advertising is strictly regulated (e.g., the Surgeon General's warning appears prominently in each ad), and we did not feel that the ads were misleading or in bad taste.

Of course, there is also the matter of money. Publishing an sf magazine is not a high profit business, and we can obviously use the income from advertising. Additional income is used, whenever possible, to improve our product and service. In this case, the advertising was one factor that enabled us to add 16 pages with the October issue without any increase in price.

As to the prominence of the ad, the insert is suppled by the advertiser, and for mechanical reasons must be placed in the center of the magazine. On the plus side, an insert does not take space that might be used for editorial material. Finally, you can always tear the thing out and throw it away.

—E. L. F.

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Philip Latham is a pseudonym for the prominent astronomer Robert S. Richardson. His latest story is about a hard-working, rational minded astronomer who is married to the Official Witch of California.

# Jeannette's Hands

## by PHILIP LATHAM

DAGNY WAS IN BED WHEN Bob came up with the breakfast tray and paper. He had started serving his wife's breakfast in bed when she became ill shortly after their marriage five years ago and had continued the custom as a once-a-week ritual. It was nearly eleven, late for the Archers even for Sundays. Dagny lay back on her pillow, her face still pale and languid from sleep.

"Ready for coffee?" he inquired.

"Please."

Bob had his usual trouble clearing a place for the tray. He didn't mind the lotion, lipstick, tampon boxes, nail scissors, and other toilet articles that littered the dressing table. You expected such junk on a woman's dressing table. What aroused his ire were those damn hands.

Originally the "hands" had been part of Jeannette, a mannequin in an exclusive boutique over in Beverly Hills. Jeannette's hands were among Dagny's most prized possessions. (It was not until Jeannette's forepaws had entered their household that Bob had learned that mannequins have proper names the same as people.) The hands and forearms, alas, were all that remained of Jeannette's anatomy after the 6.7 magnitude California earthquake of memorable date. Whereas her head and torso were shattered beyond repair, by some strange quirk of fate her hands had gone unscathed. The proprietress, a close friend of Dagny's, had bestowed them upon her as a precious keepsake. The hands not only looked real but felt real. Unlike most mannequins, the fingers were flexible, made



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of some rubber and fiberglass composition, a closely guarded secret of the manufacturer.*

Dagny had put the hands to effective use when playing the Snow Queen in the annual Christmas show of the Women's Assistance League. She kept the hands concealed in a refrigerator. Then with the forearms shrouded under her robe, she elicited delighted squeals from the kids at the icy impact of their touch. In fact, Jeannette's hands, together with Dagny's dramatic experience, had made the Snow Queen the hit of the show.

"Couldn't find anyplace else for these hands, could you?" Bob said, maneuvering for space on the dresser top.

"I don't see why you're continually complaining about those hands," Dagny murmured.

"They bug me, that's why."

" 'Bug' you?"

Dagny still occasionally had trouble with her husband's Americanisms. Although a native Russian, she had lived mostly in Paris, until she met Bob and moved to Pasadena. Only to her he was never "Bob" but "Robert."

"Simply the pontifical symbol of blessing," Dagny said. "It means you're in a state of grace."

"Like hell I am."

"I promise to move them," Dagny said.

"Needn't bother. Got room now," Bob told her.

For several minutes they sat in silence, sipping coffee, and perusing the paper. It appeared from the headlines that unless immediate remedial measures were taken, the world was doomed to imminent extinction.

After a hasty glance through the sports section Bob tossed his paper aside.

"End of fiscal year. Notice from Great White Father at Washington came this week. No raise as usual."

Dagny continued with the comic section.

"We'll manage somehow," Dagny told him. "I was casting our horoscope yesterday. Our future looks quite promising."

Dagny's preoccupation with astrology, sorcery, witchcraft, and other assorted nonsense had been a source of bitter contention in their premarriage period. Society today will tolerate practically anything: interracial marriage or no marriage at all provoke scarcely the lift of an eyebrow. But an astronomer tied up with an astrologer. . .Well, that's going a bit too far. With the passage of time, however, Bob had come

** The mannequins you see displayed in the best dress shops are not exactly cheap. Their price starts at about $200.*

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to accept his wife's interest in the occult with the same resignation with which most husband's eventually learn to live with their wives' various and sundry foibles. Also, in Bob's particular case, submission to Dagny's faith in the supernatural was more readily understandable than most. His wife had other things going for her besides her horoscope.

Dagny handed him a sheet from the *Times*.

"Some more about your friend Dr. Thornton."

"Again!"

The page featured a photograph of a man of middle age, with strong well-defined features, a straight-stemmed brier pipe clenched in his teeth. He was standing by a measuring machine examining a picture of some celestial object.

"Good-looking, isn't he?" said Dagny.

"You think so?"

"Very."

Bob gave the photo and story a quick once-over.

"Only half a dozen errors," he commented. "Photographer shot him from below 'stead of topside so his bald spot doesn't show. He's forty-two, not thirty-nine. And that's M33 in Triangulum he's got there, not M31 in Andromeda.

" 'Dr. Thornton, noted astronomer at the world famous Mt. Elsinore Observatory, will be in London this September when he receives the gold medal of the Royal Astronomical Society, one of the highest honors—' "

Bob snorted.

"Best thing astronomical societies do—hand out gold medals.

" '—Dr. Thornton's researches indicate a value for the age of the universe some ten times the previously accepted value—'

"There's some of us don't agree."

"Anyone I know?"

"Your husband, for one."

Dagny's gaze remained fixed on Thornton's profile.

"If you are right and he is wrong," she said, "then why doesn't the Royal Society give their gold medal to you?"

"Well, it's kind of hard to explain," Bob said, after a pause. "Personality enters into these things more'n you might think. Thornton's the masterful, dominating type. People read what he writes. Nobody pays attention to my stuff. He's a lucky observer. He proceeds as if it were impossible to fail. I'm always afraid of failing—so I generally fail. The farther you get from Thornton the bigger he looms. You either worship him from afar or hate him from the sidelines."

"Where is it you disagree?" Dagny inquired.

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"That's a rather tough question. . ."

"Oh, well, if it's so top secret. . ."

Bob hesitated.

"Promise you won't breathe a word?"

Dagny shrugged. "I promise."

"Well, you see, I've gone over some of Thornton's stuff myself. Used the same measures and the same techniques. And our results don't agree. I just can't make 'em agree."

"You scientists never agree."

"Well, not exactly," Bob admitted. "You don't expect *exact* agreement. But in this case disagreement is way beyond the normal limits of error. It's my considered opinion"—his voice fell—"that Thornton's results are deliberately rigged."

" 'Rigged'?"

"Changed just enough to give results exceeding other observers. With the largest telescope in the world at his command he's pretty safe. Who can check him?"

Dagny received this astounding communication with comparative calm.

"Darling, I thought you were going to tell me of Thornton doing something serious. Like stealing the *Blue Boy* at the Huntington or uprooting Christmas Tree Lane. After all, it's only the universe."

"Deliberate scientific deception *is* something pretty serious," Bob declared. "Understand—I can't prove a thing. He's rigged his results to give the cosmologists a real jolt. So now they're talking about the 'Thornton Universe.' Hence . . .the gold medal."

Dagny contemplated her husband long and thoughtfully. Her violet eyes narrowed.

"Darling Robert," she said, "you know what I think?"

"Precious angel, I wouldn't have the faintest notion what's going through that lovely blonde head of yours."

"I think you're jealous."

"What's so wrong with a man wanting a little recognition for his work?"

"And you're hurt—really hurt."

Bob did not respond.

Dagny squeezed his hand.

"Your turn is coming, Robert. I *know* it's coming. Any time. . .any moment."

Bob shook his head.

"Sorry. . .'fraid I'm just not the gold medal type."

"But I *know!*"

Their remarks were interrupted by a peal from the doorbell.

"You see!" Dagny cried. "The good news—right on cue. *La piece bien faite!*"

Dagny, in moments of stress, had a disconcerting way of lapsing into French.

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"More likely the Girl Scouts selling peanuts," Bob muttered. He hesitated, then at the second peal, rose reluctantly and shuffled down the stairs. He returned after a moment with a long thin envelope bearing an impressive wax seal.

"Special delivery," he said, handing Dagny the missive. "For you."

Dagny paled. Her eyes darkened. She reached for the envelope hesitantly, almost fearfully, as if it were some relic sacred to the touch. Then with a sudden convulsive motion she tore open the envelope from which she extracted a stiff parchmentlike sheet of paper, upon which was inscribed a single handwritten line. For what must have been a full minute she lay staring at it, her lips moving perceptibly, as if savoring every word. Then she sank back upon the pillow, the parchment clutched to her breast, her fingers trembling.

Bob was not so alarmed by this emotional upheaval as one might have supposed. His wife was a good actress. So good he could never be sure whether her histrionics were for real or just pretend.

"Bad news?" he inquired.

"Wonderful news," said Dagny in a barely audible whisper.

"We're a long time overdue."

"It's like a dream."

"Must be a real REM blockbuster."*

"I've been appointed."

Bob regarded his wife with a sense of vague foreboding. "Appointed? Appointed to what?"

"Official Witch! Official Witch of California!"

Bob's reaction might be compared with that of a patient just informed he is the victim of inoperable lung cancer.

"I knew California's got an official Poet Laureate. I knew we've got more crackpots per square centimeter than any other state in the Union. But I'll be damned if I knew we had an Official Witch."

"Robert, darling, there are so many things you don't know."

"You mean really *official*? Like the governor or treasurer?"

"Well, not exactly. . ."

"God!" he cried. "To think we've come down to *that!*"

"Come *down!*" Dagny said. "Think of the honor. Think what it *means.*"

"I'll tell you what it means," Bob roared, rising and pacing the floor. "It means the end of my career. Before—well, dabbling in astrology and that junk wasn't so bad. People just shrugged it off. But *now!*

** Strong REMs, or Rapid Eye Movements, generally indicate a person is experiencing a vivid dream.*

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Who'll have any use for an astronomer whose wife goes in for witchcraft. . .black magic . . .satanism?"

But he had lost his audience. Dagny was in a trance. Lady Macbeth sleepwalking in a twin bed.

"Theodoris of Lemnos. . . Madeleine de Bovan of France . . .Medea of Colchis. And now"—she hugged herself ecstatically—"Dagny Archer of Pasadena. I'll outdo them all!"

Dagny's apotheosis to official state witchdom was announced in the Los Angeles *Times* of the following Tuesday morning. Bob had cherished some faint hope of its being buried in an obscure paragraph among the vital statistics. Instead he found it spread all over the front page of the second section. At the top was a close-up of Dagny gazing fondly at her ginger cat Margarita. The young fellow who did the write-up took special pains to emphasize the unusual nature of the Golden State's new sorceress. Instead of the stereotyped witch of old, she was a young and beautiful suburban housewife, a far cry from the secret, black and midnight hags that had wrought such havoc in the Macbeth household.

Yes, Mrs. Archer said, she had been fascinated by the occult since earliest childhood. She deplored the widespread misconceptions concerning witchcraft. Witches inflict injury? In the Middle Ages they called it, "casting an evil spell." Today to the psychoanalysts it was the "id impulse." Withdrawing the sins you had committed in the external world and turning them upon yourself. The witch served merely as the scapegoat for one's own evil impulses.

How about those so-called "love philtres"?

Mrs. Archer could not refrain from laughter. Without going into detail, she intimated there were other means of arousing a man's desire available to a woman far more potent than any brew in the pharmacopoeia of witchcraft.

As to hobbies, her chief interest outside the occult was in the theater. Although a native Russian, she had spent her youth in France and played professionally upon the stage in Paris.

"My best role was Laura in Strindberg's *The Father*. Laura, you know, was Strindberg's surrogate for his first wife." (*Surrogate*, Bob told himself. Make mental note to look it up.) "A fascinating part that must be played with the greatest restraint. A woman smoldering inside before she becomes demoniacal in her rage to

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destroy her enemy."

Bob had to admit the part about Dagny was pretty good. It was the part about himself that rankled.

Yes, her husband was an astronomer on the staff of the Mt. Elsinore Observatory.

What was his opinion of astrology?

His opinion on that subject, she feared, would not be printable in a family paper like the *Times*. To put it mildly, he was rather skeptical on the subject. Fortunately the part about himself came at the end, where few people were likely to see it.

Upon arrival at the office, however, it was quite plain that everybody in the entire institution had seen it. Not that anybody said anything. Oh, a few close friends made quips about their whoreoscopes, when Venus would be at the ascending node of Jupiter, and similar bits of scintillating humor. Otherwise he was not merely left alone. He was virtually shunned.

Bob made straight for his office,* shut the door and began sweating over some calculations on the Hyades cluster.** But try as he would, inevitably, his thoughts kept straying from Ambrosia, Eudora, Pedile, Coronis, Polyxo, Phyto, and Thyene, to another nymph some 135 light-years closer by the name of Dagny Archer. *Official Witch!* He must declare—nay, demand—that forthwith she resign this odious appointment that would soon render his professional position intolerable. He rehearsed his speech all the way home.

But when he stalked into the house, he found Dagny on the telephone, talking long distance to some warlock or werewolf, and could not be interrupted under any circumstances. He hung around the phone for a while, but when it became apparent that members of the occult had as much difficulty communicating as ordinary mortals, he wandered out to the kitchen to seek solace in the liquor cabinet. First he took a long pull straight out of the bottle, then mixed a whisky and soda and retired to the patio to drink like a gentleman. Margarita, dozing on the chair opposite, regarded him with that introspective expression characteristic of felines in repose.

At length Dagny joined him with her glass of tomato juice. She neither smoked nor drank; in fact, she regarded any drug

* *Astronomers spend most of their time in their offices in town.*

** *Besides those visible to the eye, some 200 stars have been identified within the Hyades cluster. Our scale of the universe depends in a critical way upon the distance assigned this cluster.*

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that might impair the acuity of her senses as shocking.

"This revival of interest in the occult," she enthused. "It's positively sweeping the country. You know, so much of your science doesn't sound a bit different to me from occultism. All this talk about quarks and leptons and these new things . . .black holes?"

"Nothing new to me," Bob said. "Been groping around in some black hole all my life."

Dagny sensed his mood in an instant.

"Oh, Robert, don't be so stuffy. So I'm Official Witch. Does that mean the end of the world? 'What is truth?' Who can say? There are two sides to every question."

"Not to this one there isn't."

"You're not being fair."

"Dagny, darling, *think!*" Bob cried. "How can some miserable chunk of matter like Uranus, three billion miles away, conceivably influence our lives here on Earth?"

Dagny's fingers wandered to Margarita.

"You said yourself the discovery of radio waves had revolutionized astronomy. May not other waves be reaching us too? Waves as yet unknown?"

"Probably are," Bob agreed.

"I *know* they are. I can feel them."

Bob was also beginning to feel certain vibrations stirring within him, albeit noncosmic in origin. He was drunk and he knew it. Tomorrow he would feel like the devil.

He crossed the patio a bit unsteadily, enfolded Dagny in his arms, his fingers groping for her breasts. She drew his face down to hers. The violet tints of her veins were as delicate as those of an angel.

*Or a witch.*

He didn't know. At the moment he didn't care.

He was right about the hangover. But it was a hangover of a special type, one not accompanied by the usual depression of the higher nerve centers. Some of the buoyancy of the previous evening still lingered. Of one thing Bob was sure. Dagny, if she cared to make the effort, could get any man she wanted to do anything she wanted.

He pitched into the Hyades with renewed zeal. Once he had gotten discouraged and chucked the girls in the wastebasket. Today they were more encouraging. He drove himself relentlessly. Long after the building was quiet and the parking lot emptied, he was still pounding away.

Someone knocked.

He turned sharply, genuinely startled. A dark figure loomed in the opal glass of the doorway.

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"Come in."

To his relief it was MacGuire. MacGuire was one of the few members of the staff he really liked.

To MacGuire, as secretary of the institution, fell the unenviable task of making out the observing program for the telescopes on the mountain. Professional astronomers bear scant resemblance to their popular image: lofty-minded, idealistic souls, with their heads among the stars. For the most part they are cranky anti-social characters, absorbed in their own narrow field of investigation, and little else. Thus, making out an observing program acceptable to all was fraught with difficulties. The astronomers seldom got the nights they wanted, at the times they wanted, or as many as they felt they deserved.

MacGuire's expression was solemn as befits a man laden with heavy responsibilities. He laid several long sheets on the desk headed *250-Inch*, *Schmidt*, *60-Inch*, etc. The papers were marked into columns and squares. At the top of each column was a date. About half the squares were filled with various observers' initials. He indicated the sheet headed *250-Inch*.

"I got you down for July 29, 30 and 31. Okay?"

"Okay," Bob told him, jotting the dates on his desk pad. "Now how about the others?"

"That's all."

"That's all?" Bob regarded him incredulously. "What d'you mean—that's all? You know I want to do some more photometry on M110."

"Bob, I'm sorry as hell. But the schedule's all balled up this run."

"It's all balled up every run."

"Yeah, but it's worse this time. On account of Thornton going to Hawaii, you know."

"No, I didn't know."

"Neither did I till he sprung it on me last week."

"What's so big with Hawaii?"

"Jupiter's occulting a sixth-magnitude star morning of the 31st. BO. Thornton wants to try for it with that new telescope he designed for Mount Mauna Kea. Best chance to get molecular abundance of Jupiter's atmosphere in years."

"Screw Jupiter's atmosphere. Let him observe it here."

"Can't. Doesn't begin on Pacific Coast till sunrise."

"What's that got to do with me?"

MacGuire's expression was not altogether happy.

"He needs more spectra on that new cluster of his. Only got one good one so far. But if

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the others bear it out, it'll prove up his model universe for sure."

"I still don't see—"

"So Thornton, as chairman of the program committee, thought maybe you—"

"Maybe *me!*"

"Bob, it's just on account of this damn occultation."

"You mean I'm to work as. . .Thornton's *assistant?*"

There was a long silence. MacGuire stirred uneasily.

"I guess there's something else we ought to talk about, too."

Bob remained staring straight ahead.

"You know they're pretty lenient around here some ways," MacGuire said. "Like getting drunk or taking a woman up on the mountain. But there's absolutely one thing you can't do in a serious scientific institution like this place. You can't mix astronomy and astrology."

"Are you by any chance referring to my wife?"

MacGuire nodded reluctantly.

"But, dammit, Mac, it's not *my* doing," Bob protested. "I'm just as set against it—"

"Sure, Bob, that's what I told the committee. It'd been all right except for Thornton."

"Thornton?"

"You know how he's been pressuring the Astronomy Missions Board to get a couple of million for that gravitational wave detector. AMB's getting tougher every year. But Thornton's got lots of pull. Almost had 'em convinced. Then this story about Dagny's being Official Witch broke.

"Well. . .that killed it. Legislators just laughed. Claimed we're no different from those other quacks and screwballs."

Bob turned slowly.

"Mac, tell me, did Thornton mention Dagny by name?"

"Well, it's kind of hard to remember—"

"Did he?"

"Guess he might have—"

Bob was on his feet in an instant.

"The son of a bitch! I'll knock his head off!"

MacGuire shoved him back in his seat.

"Now you listen to me," he said sternly. "You think a long time before you go taking a swing at anybody around here."

Suddenly Bob's hangover hit him like a wave. His hands, his whole arms, began trembling. He couldn't keep them from trembling.

"I'm resigning," he said dully.

MacGuire patted his shoulder.

"Don't do anything now. Go home. Have a drink. I'd say you could use one."

Bob didn't answer.

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Dagny and Margarita were in the patio when Bob joined them with his drink. Dagny was sipping iced tomato juice. Margarita, curled on her lap, scrutinized him briefly and resumed her slumbers.

"So things didn't go so well at the office?" said Dagny.

Bob wished he could make out her face, but the shadows were too deep.

"I believe you are a witch," he muttered.

Dagny laughed.

"There are things one need not be a witch to know. Being a wife is quite sufficient."

Bob poured out the whole story. Dagny heard him through without comment.

"Well, that's it," he concluded. "Thornton'll be in Hawaii observing Jupiter while I'm slaving away on his stuff."

"Is that then so bad?"

"Bad? It's a disgrace."

"Why not see Dr. Thornton? Talk things over."

"You don't talk things over with a guy like Thornton."

"He is such a monster?"

"No. Some ways he's not so bad. Just inhuman, that's all."

"*Non, non. C'est incroyable. Impossible.*"

"Oh, guess he's got a few human traits. Heard he hits the bottle occasionally." He stared at his empty glass.

Several minutes must have passed.

"You're not a bit psychic, are you, Robert?" said Dagny.

"Nope. Never had a psychic experience in my life. All lot of bunk."

"That is unfortunate, for then you would see your Dr. Thornton is not what he appears. His desire for dominance is—what you call?—a mere cover-up. Underneath, believe me, he is *un homme mal assure.*"

Bob could follow his wife's French. It was her Russian that left him lost.

"Say, you're a witch, aren't you?" he mused.

Dagny did not respond.

"And you've still got Thornton's picture?"

She waved one hand in a careless gesture. "Somewhere."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Bob demanded. "Let's get busy with some witchcraft."

"What would you suggest?"

"Hell, that's your business," Bob exclaimed impatiently. "Hex him. Put the old curse on him."

"*Je ne com—*"

"Always heard there's a regular routine in these things. There's a guy you don't like. You get his picture. You stick a needle. . ."

He hurried on enthusiastically, so enthusiastically that he failed to notice his wife's face buried in her hands. Oh, lord, he'd done it now.

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He rushed to her side, tore aside her hands. She was sobbing. . .really sobbing. This was not pretend. He could feel the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Honey. . .darling. I was only kidding. Honest. I supposed you knew."

This woman in his arms wasn't the Official Witch of California. She was Dagny, his wife, the one person in the world he loved the most.

"You go right ahead with your witchcraft," he told her. There was a grim note in his voice. "Why, you're lots better in witchcraft than me in astronomy."

Tenderly he kissed away the tears.

"I tell you what let's do," he exclaimed. "Let's spend my three days on the mountain together. I'll reserve a cottage at the inn tonight. Working on Thornton's stuff won't seem so bad—if you're there."

He waited anxiously. "All right?"

She nodded.

"Wonderful!"

Dagny retired early. Bob wandered into the library where he sat down by the table lamp, trying to put his world together. Perhaps another drink—No, better not. Maybe something to read.

He took down one of Dagny's books on witchcraft and began turning through it at random, pausing at some passage that caught his attention.

"ASTRAL FLIGHT. The puzzling thing about astral flight is that, although rejected intuitively by a mind accustomed to scientific habits of thought, there is nevertheless a great weight of evidence in favor of its occurrence. Indeed, the evidence would be regarded as overwhelming were the phenomenon not so intrinsically unlikely."

How could anyone as intelligent as Dagny believe in such crap?

His eyes strayed from the book to last Sunday's *Times* spread on the table bearing Thornton's picture. Thornton's face was half covered by shadow, an odd double-pronged shadow.

There was something familiar. . .where. . .?

Jeannette's hands! Dagny had promised she would move them. And so she had. There they stood by the lamp with upraised fingers.

He caught an entry in the book.

". . .the position of the hand, with the second and third fingers raised, symbolizes God and Perfected Man, pouring out their blessing. Yet like all forces in the physical world, this blessing may also become a

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curse. For if the hand be so lifted that the shadow of the two fingers resembles the head and horns of the Goat Baphhomet, the fate of the person upon which their shadow falls is terrible indeed."

To Bob the trip up the winding road to the observatory was just a part of his job. The first sight of the white domes perched on the mountaintop no longer ceased to thrill. But going with Dagny was something special. She seldom accompanied him on his observing assignments. Astronomy to her was not a science but a *mystique*. Owing to her interest in astrology, however, she had of necessity acquired a considerable knowledge of practical astronomy. Not merely a superficial acquaintance with the stars, planets, and constellations, but the ability to comprehend such terms as hour angle and sidereal time, declination and right ascension.

The air cooled rapidly with altitude. At the 5000-foot level they began encountering wisps of fog, and at 7000 feet the fog had thickened until Bob was forced to reduce their progress to a bare creep. Dagny was enraptured. Buried in the fog, they seemed isolated from the world of reality. Once they spied a white squirrel peering at them from the limb of a tree.

After a leisurely lunch at the inn, Bob announced his intention of going over to the observatory where the other astronomers who happened to be on the mountain were staying, as well as the engineers and assistants who made the mountain their permanent home.

"Why bother?" said Dagny, unpacking their luggage. "The fog's so thick you can hardly see our car outside the window?"

"Matter of principle," Bob told her, changing into his old observing clothes. "An astronomer prepares his work regardless of the weather. This fog might clear up in a minute. Then where'd I be? Standing around with nothing done?"

"Embarrassing," Dagny murmured.

Bob laughed reminiscently. "Remember solar eclipse expedition I was on in New Guinea. Just a graduate student then. Morning of eclipse, clouds were so thick couldn't even find the sun. I was all for packing up. Director gave me hell. So we went ahead as per schedule. Then, few minutes before totality, just like a miracle. Clouds broke away. Corona blazed out. Got everything we came for."

He hesitated awkwardly at the door.

"Remember other night,

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told you I'd never had a psychic experience? Well, came pretty close at that eclipse. Just before totality when the moon's about cut off last bit of sun, you get the funniest feeling. Darkness comes on fast. Landscape changes color—kind of pale green tint. It's as if the light of the world was going out. The moon's shadow comes rushing at you like a pillar of doom. You get scared—really scared. All your old supernatural fears come back." He laughed sheepishly. "Funniest feeling."

Dagny was surveying their clothes and toilet articles strewn over the bed.

"I forgot the toothpaste," she exclaimed.

Bob felt humiliated and degraded at the thought of being reduced to working on Thornton's program. Once having committed himself, however, personalities ceased to matter. He would exert himself to secure the best observations possible, just as a surgeon would operate with the same care on an enemy as a friend. Naturally, if the weather prevented observations, that was not his fault.

At sunset the fog suddenly cleared away leaving the sky washed crystal clear. Bob waited awhile, then telephoned his night assistant at the 250-inch to go ahead and open the dome. But he had hardly covered the half mile to the dome when the fog was back again. And so it went the whole night, alternately clearing up and clouding over, so that Bob got nothing, and returned to their cottage at dawn feeling more tired and frustrated than if he had put in a solid night's work.

He stole into the cottage as quietly as possible to keep from waking Dagny. Ever since midnight he had been anticipating that wonderful moment when he could crawl into his twin bed and forget the stars. But as so often happens on an astronomer's first night, the moment his head hit the pillow found him wide-eyed and staring. Sometimes he felt like two persons: one fully conscious lying beside another in a dream. Eventually he dropped into a restless sleep from which he awoke about noon. Dagny was gone. And the landscape looked as dismal as ever.

Dagny came in while he was shaving, bright and cheerful, smelling of pine and the fresh outdoors. She had bought some postcards at the inn.

"I got some pictures," she said, displaying the cards. "Deer, squirrels, flowers."

"So I see."

"Bad night?"

He nodded.

"Terrible night. No luck at all."

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The second night was a repetition of the first. Bob put on a suitably doleful face and commiserated with his fellow observers at the Schmidt and 60-inch. Secretly he could hardly conceal his exultation. Just let it stick around one more night. Thornton's stuff would go down the drain, and he could pull out with a clear conscience. Moreover, he slept good the second night and at mealtime was all animation. (Breakfast for Bob; lunch for Dagny.)

After dinner on the evening of the 31st he gave the 250-inch dome a ring. "We'll stay up till two," he told his night assistant. "Then unless it looks real good, we'll call it a night."

After dinner he and Dagny changed into lounging robes and settled down for a grim session with the ancient TV set provided by the management. To their delight they discovered an old movie was on dating back to their honeymoon days. Soon they were holding hands and feeling very nostalgic. Even the commercials were welcome, as they gave Bob a chance to duck outside to check on the weather. And always he was gratified by confrontation with a solid wall of fog.

At the final fade-out at eleven, however, he found the world transformed: the lights of the valley visible clear to the horizon, and the stars of Cygnus and Lyra glittering overhead.

"Jupiter," Dagny whispered, gazing in awe at a huge yellow star in the east.

"Yep, Jupiter rising in Capricornus," said Bob.

"I wonder what Dr. Thornton's doing in Hawaii?"

Bob laughed.

"Probably not much of anything right now. Occultation won't start till around dawn here."

Suddenly the lights of the valley dimmed. Jupiter vanished. And in a matter of moments the world was its old dreary self again.

They scurried back to the warmth of the cottage. Bob glanced at the clock. Midnight. Two more hours till freedom.

Bob turned out the lights except for the shaded lamp by the clock. Dagny laid aside her robe and stretched out on her bed. For a while they sat in the semidarkness exchanging desultory remarks. Conversation dwindled. . .faded into silence.

Dagny removed her thin nightdress. Bob began caressing her, gently at first, then almost fiercely. Already he could feel her responding, straining closer. . .

It was going to be a good night, Bob reflected, fog or no fog.

Bob came struggling up into

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consciousness through some vast gray distance measurable only in megaparsecs. There was a ringing noise. For what seemed a long time he thought it part of some dream. Suddenly it got through to him. The telephone.

He groped for the instrument.

"Opening up, Dr. Archer?" It was the night assistant at the 250-inch.

"Thought it'd fogged over."

"Cleared up an hour ago."

"Go ahead and set up. Be right over."

This last was a slight exaggeration. Bob had not anticipated getting dressed in such a hurry, and his observing clothes were scattered all over the place. Another handicap was trying to get dressed without awakening Dagny. Her face was nearly covered by her hair, leaving only her profile exposed against the pillow. How still she lay. Her long dark lashes as immobile of those of a doll's. Not the slightest perceptible motion of the coverlet to betray her breathing.

He decided to walk instead of taking the car. Trying to start their old car would make an awful racket. Walking would be just about as quick anyway. With his flashlight he could take the little trail to the dome they called the Lucky Strike.

But he had reckoned without the altitude. By the time he reached the dome and climbed the long flight of stairs to the control board, he was panting and speechless. He hung draped over the iron railing encircling the telescope like a beaten fighter dangling on the ropes.

The dome was open, but the telescope was in its usual upright position.

"How come you didn't make the setting?" Bob gasped when he was able to speak.

The night assistant knocked the ashes from his pipe. "Didn't have the position."

"Left it right here on the desk."

"Didn't see it."

Followed a frantic session in which they searched the desk, the floor around the desk, the drawers, the record book, even the darkroom and toilet. But the vital information necessary to pinpoint the tiny spot of light far beyond the range of vision remained obstinately missing. The conclusion was inescapable. In his haste to get away, Bob had left the setting and identification chart back at the cottage.

What to do?

The time needed for Bob to make the round trip to the cottage, get the telescope set, and start the exposure could easily take an hour, probably longer since he was unfamiliar with the star field and might

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have trouble identifying his object. Dawn comes on early in July. He could, of course, call the cottage and get the object's right ascension and declination from Dagny. But the position of the star field would be no good without the identification chart. The object might be any one of a dozen stars.*

Bob was going through his pockets for the third time when he stopped, frozen by the clang from the iron door at the foot of the stairs. A moment's silence. Then the sound of footsteps slowly mounting the stairs. He and the night assistant exchanged glances.

"Somebody from the Schmidt or 60-inch?" said Bob.

The assistant shook his head emphatically. "Couldn't be. They closed up for good at eleven."

"Must be a staff member. Who else'd have a key?"

"Don't know," the assistant muttered. "But I mean to find out."

He touched a button killing the dome lights, leaving them in darkness except for the faint red glow of the dials on the instrument panel. Bob heard him hurrying down the winding stairs to the landing by the coude room. Followed the sound of low voices, then soft footsteps receding down the stairs. The assistant emerged from the darkness, hit the dome lights. He handed Bob an envelope.

"These the papers you wanted?"

Bob made a quick inspection.

"The works!" he cried. "But who—"

"Dunno. Lady gave 'em to me."

Undoubtedly Dagny. She must have awakened, noticed the papers on the dresser, and realizing his predicament brought them over in the car. She had a key to the dome.

He glanced at the sidereal clock. Nearly 23 hours. They'd have to work fast.

"Well, here you are," he said, handing the assistant the position.

"Stephan's quintet, eh?" the assistant remarked.

"Stephan's quintet? No. This object's way farther north in Pegasus."

"Position sure looks like Stephan's quintet to me," the night assistant declared. "Set on it too many times before."

*The 250-inch reflector on Mount Elsinore is unique among large telescopes in having an alta-azimuth instead of the usual equatorial mounting. An equatorially mounted telescope driven at the sidereal rate will track a star automatically. The alta-azimuth type mounting is simpler but will not track the stars. To overcome this disadvantage an elaborate computer system is necessary.

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Bob examined the figures written on the slip of paper. "That's Thornton's handwriting, isn't it?"

The assistant began leafing through the record book.

"Soon find out."

He stopped at some entries under Thornton's initials.

"Thornton's handwriting all right," he said. "Notice way he makes his figure fours. Always writes a four closed at the top. Everybody else leaves it open.

"Well, I got this setting straight from MacGuire, and MacGuire got it straight from Thornton," Bob said. "So. . . must be Stephan's quintet."

Once decided, they went ahead in record time. In a few minutes Bob was comparing the stars in the field of view of the telescope with those of his negative print. Fortunately the object was easily identified. He maneuvered it onto the slit of the spectrograph, picked up a guide star, and managed to get two full-length exposures just as dawn was showing.

"Got 'em," Bob called triumphantly to his assistant. "You can close 'er up and go home."

Bob stayed behind in the darkroom to develop and process his plates. That way they should be dry by noon, so he and Dagny could leave for home directly after lunch. One glance at the dark streaks on the slivers of glass showed he had hit the exposure time and focus just right.

Bob took Dagny home, changed his clothes, and started back to the office.

"Don't expect me till late," he told Dagny. "I want to take a good look at these plates."

It was fortunate he warned her for it was deep twilight when he returned. After the cool of the mountain the valley was like an oven. Bob's clean shirt was soaked through. Dagny, clad in a thin transparent Empire style gown, was as cool and serene as a goddess.

They sat in the patio for several minutes without speaking, Bob sipping his whisky and soda, Dagny her iced tomato juice.

Bob was the first to speak.

"Quite a bit's happened in the last three days."

"Oh?" said Dagny, her fingertips lightly brushing Margarita's silken hair.

"You heard about Thornton yet?"

Dagny shook her head.

"Thornton never got that occultation."

"No? He, too, then, had clouds?"

"Thornton's dead."

Dagny continued stroking Margarita.

"How. . .dead?"

Bob hesitated.

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"Don't know for sure yet. Seems Thornton was relaxing in the observatory library. Had everything ready to roll. Immersion still couple of hours off. Night assistant in galley thought he heard voices. . .then a shot. Rushed in. Found Thornton dead with revolver nearby."

Bob wished he could see Dagny's face, but it was full night now.

"Apparently Thornton wasn't alone," Bob continued. "There were two glasses on the table, both of which showed fingerprints. One set was identified with Thornton's. The other also showed prints of fingers."

"These fingerprints. . .they have been identified?"

Bob shook his head.

"I didn't say finger*prints*. I said *prints of fingers*. No whorls or ridge structure. Just blank impressions."

"Probably gloves."

"Police don't think so. It seems they have ways of checking these things. Right now police don't know what to think. Could be most anything. Accident. . .suicide. . .murder."

"*Dlia menia eto boodet camoubistvo*," said Dagny.

"What was that?"

"*Moi, je crois qu'il s'est tue.*"

"You believe. . . ."

"I believe it was suicide," said Dagny. "I told you he was *un homme mal assure*—very insecure."

"That's right—so you did."

Neither spoke for several minutes.

"Maybe it was just as well," Bob mused. "Those observations I got were. . .well, very peculiar. MacGuire and I both agreed. Put an awful dent in Thornton's theory. He probably suspicioned something of the sort. In any case, after seeing them, he couldn't possibly have accepted that award from the Royal Society. Upset our whole conception of the universe."

Dagny's gaze wandered upward to the stars. "To me. . .the stars look just the same."

Bob dismissed the visible stars with a contemptuous wave of his hand.

"Oh, those stars don't count. I'm talking about way-out objects. The invisible universe."

"What invisible universe?" Dagny cried. "Time and distance—for me they do not exist.

"Those witches of old!" She laughed. "Their powers were so limited. Medea—she scarcely spanned the Aegean Sea. But for Dagny, her power extends to the farthest star. To the outermost bounds of creation."

Bob lingered till long after midnight in the library. The events of the last twenty-four hours had left him completely unstrung.

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Again he began leafing through Dagny's book on the occult.

"It is a mistake to think that witches are invariably old and haglike. Many are beautiful young women and often married. They flee home by enchanting their husbands and escape detection by means of a surrogate."

"Surrogate." There was that word again. He turned to the glossary.

"SURROGATE. As ordinarily used, an agent or deputy representing another. In witchcraft, a phantom image left behind to deceive another."

The paper with Thornton's picture was still there on the table. But different now. Where were the two forked shadows of Jeannette's fingers that had fallen across it? Jeannette's hands with the smooth velvety fingers? Gone. . .gone. . . .

Bob felt fear stealing over him. Fear buried below his thin veneer of scientific learning. The same primitive fear he had experienced at the total eclipse of the sun.

And just as impossible to resist.

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Robert Lory's new story concerns an executive in a mammoth organization, and the author writes: "I happen to be working for one of the world's mammothest organizations—as, incidentally, a PR advisor on matters Far East. 'Kite' is sort of the way things are going. But that doesn't mean I think that the way things are going is bad. Not for myself, anyway. *I've* got a nine-cup coffee pot. And I'm not in Duluth, not yet. . ."

# Kite: Yellow and Green

**by ROBERT LORY**

THE WHIR ITSELF IS NEUtral, neither good nor bad. The results are what counts, and they can be good, bad or neither. For me, when I heard it at 0900 that Friday morning, it boded ill. I was in that sort of mood, mainly due to her and the kid.

Her. At 0800 I leave the apartment—a six-roomer; I'm something of a success for my thirty-eight years—and get her usual peck on the cheek. She's thirty-one, black hair, mouth that curls up or down at the corners giving her a pixyish look when up, a crabby, cranky look when down. Down most of the time. Small boobs, too. I'm not much for small boobs.

A peck on the cheek. "I love you, I guess," she says. I nod. In agreement, acceptance. Acceptance of her guessing and of her small boobs.

The kid. Age ten, girl. Name of Nancy or Nan or Nanny or something. Cute enough, better mouth than her mother's, but talks too loud for eight in the morning. "Can I, Daddy, can I?"

"Can you what? Oh, the kite."

"Yes, Daddy, yellow and green. You promised."

I had not promised. "I did not promise. In fact, I recall saying something about the park area being too small for kites."

"Mommy—he did promise, he *did!*"



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Her. She looks at the kid, then at me, then back at the kid. "Darling, I think it was your last daddy who promised."

Last daddy. She always liked to talk about the kid's last daddy, as if I was an inferior model or something.

I left with that thought in my craw. So my reaction to the *whir* is understandable.

Naturally, I recognized it for what it was. The organization I work for is mammoth in size. In Topeka headquarters alone, we have four thousand people—all in the aptly named Topeka Headquarters Building, in which my office was on the thirty-second floor. Or was it the thirty-third? No matter, the computerized elevator always opened at the right floor and the side-ramp deposited me right before door number. . . . whatever it was. I do remember, though, that my last assignment had me on the thirteenth floor.

Central also joked about it when I was transferred to the thirty-second (or thirty-third) floor. "See—thirteen isn't always unlucky, Manager Coopersmith," Central said.

Central has a great sense of humor.

In the old days, I'm told, when buildings were built to be static and stationary, minor and major discrepancies could exist between a man's job and the size and accouterments of his office. A smart operator could expand his realm to the point where he might have a nine-cup coffee pot rather than his authorized six. This, as we all know, was the era of competitive free enterprise, and such things were allowed—even though higher management might frown outwardly. After all, the boys were just being acquisitive, which was the nature of things, and a six-cup man who had somehow grasped hold of a nine-cup pot. . .well, need we say more? Have the executive development committee put a gold star on the tab of his personnel information data card; here's a man who bears watching.

Of course, those were the days before. Before skull-scanning, before really scientific management and personnel placement which assured that the best man at any given time was in any given position. And assured that the rewards of his rank were appropriate—to the *nth* exactitude.

What made all this possible was the nonstatic building interior which changed. Which changed regularly, continually. But no reason to fear. You would not be affected unless the walls, floor and ceiling around you began to move.

The *whir* told you that was happening.

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There, at my four-module desk, that Friday morning at 0900, as I sat staring at my Automate Input—Output Transreceiver, I heard the *whir.* And the past hour came back to me.

Her. The kid. "Last daddy." The commuter tube, in which some fat oaf lurched and drove his attache case deep into my unprotected groin. The quick-ramp, upon which I sped past one of the mosquito auto-sprays designed to protect Topeka's citizens, but the speeding wasn't speedy enough. As for the goddamn spray, they're not supposed to be operational during commuting rush hours. Obviously defective.

Defective. And it hit *me.* Thirteen isn't always unlucky. But how about thirty-one? No, I'm on thirty-two or three. Hell, maybe it's thirty-one—who besides the elevator and Central cares?

*Whir.*

The door panel is always first. It seals shut to prevent anybody trying to enter your office while its structure is changing. Next is the wall with the window, if you've got one. I had one, a three-module window—merely a status symbol, since my office was not facing the building exterior. Behind it, however, a tri-D scene of the city skyline changed its chiaroscuro to the tune of the path of a make-believe sun, just as outside the real thing played upon the up-jutting structures which had modeled for the scene. Central once told me that the tri-D version is better than the real thing. "Peaceful. No people, no pollution."

Anyway, the window wall was second. A steel panel slid over the front of the glass.

*Whir.* And a slight rumble-rumble. This was at my feet as the floor prepared to move up or down or vertically, whichever was its—and my—destination.

We moved southeast, the floor moving out at about twenty KPH. *Whir.* And I noticed something I didn't like much. Of course, I never liked it much. The way the walls seem to close in on you.

"Necessary, albeit somewhat unsettling," Central had explained that first time. "You see, a little bit of give here and take there is necessary now and then. In order to negotiate the corners."

Maybe, but this time. . . .

That north wall, for example. For that matter, the east and west walls, too. I looked behind me, at the south wall.

It was—I was sure it was—too damned close!

As for corners, we'd had plenty of time to negotiate three or more.

I gripped my chair. Or I tried to. Suddenly it wasn't there. It

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had dropped through the floor. Very fast. The panel had closed by the time I hit. Hard.

The desk! That was going too. And those blasted walls. If they came in any closer, I was going to be in a broom closet.

They came in closer. I stood. The desk was dropping fast.

I pushed the transceiver. Five digits.

"Central," the voice came through. Weakly.

"Central, this is Manager Coopersmith!"

"Good morning, Manager Coopersmith. What can I do for you?"

*Whir.*

"You can tell me what the hell is going on!"

"Surely, although there is no need for vile language. *Where* would you like to know what is going on? Specifics help even the ablest computer."

"In my office, dammit! Right here in my office!" The broom closet had shrunk to an economy-size broom closet.

"In your office, Manager Coopersmith? Your *Topeka* office?"

WHIR!

"Where else would I be calling from—Buenos Aires?"

The *whir* stopped.

Then started again.

The broom closet began to get a little larger.

"Actually," Central said. "I would have said Duluth."

I repeated the last word.

"Duluth," Central said again. "There must have been some slip-up. I gather you did not get your notice of transfer."

"You gather correct. Transfer to where?"

"I was certain I gathered correct, Manager Coopersmith. To Duluth, naturally. Your office here is being temporarily eliminated to accommodate a new function."

"I nearly was permanently eliminated."

"A serious error."

"Damn right."

"Serious indeed. You are needed in Duluth. I shall arrange for immediate transportation. Your family will be notified at once and arrangements made for them. You should be at the loading ramp in fifteen minutes."

"I'll be glad to be anywhere out of here—just as soon as you provide me with a *door!*"

*Whir.*

Duluth. I had no feeling about the place one way or the other. Certainly it wasn't headquarters, but it's necessary for a man to have field experience if his career is to progress upwardly. And Duluth is one of the better divisions. At least, I thought so. One couldn't be sure in my end of the business. As a matter of fact, I really wasn't all that sure

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as to what specifically my end of the business was.

Oh, I knew I analyzed data. Or the machines that worked for me did. But as to what happened to my reports or how they were used. . . .

But maybe in Duluth.

Place is not important. *Position*, though—that is everything. The actual job is not important, its relationship to other jobs is. So it was natural for me to wonder. How many modules to my desk and office here? In other words, was my new assignment a promotion or a lateral transfer?

I did not consider the possibility of demotion. Not that it wouldn't be possible, just that I refuse to consider such things. Besides, my reports always were neat.

It was noon, or shortly before, when we landed at the Duluth Regional Headquarters Building. I waited for the plexiglas hovercraft door to open immediately. It did not. Instead, the on-craft transceiver flickered to life.

"Welcome to Duluth, Manager Coopersmith. You were expected earlier, but Topeka Central has explained the error causing your late arrival. We hope you will like Duluth and your work here with us. However, since it is almost the lunch hour, I have directed the hovercraft to drop you off at your new company-leased apartment. When you return at 1330 hours, simply mention your name to the elevator computer, who will transport you to your new office. You will find that things here are as modern as at Topeka. Good morning, Manager Coopersmith."

Duluth Central did not have Topeka's winning sense of humor, I reflected, as I stood before the door of my new apartment. Thirteen, and he'd let it pass without comment.

I rang the bell. The door opened. I smiled. The family was waiting.

The kid. "Did you bring the kite, Daddy? Yellow and green?"

My smile began to fade.

Her. "Hi. Sorry about the kid. His last father promised."

I had no trace of a smile now. True, the ten-year-old this time was a boy. True, the wife had a lighter shade of hair. But still small boobs.

It was a lateral transfer.

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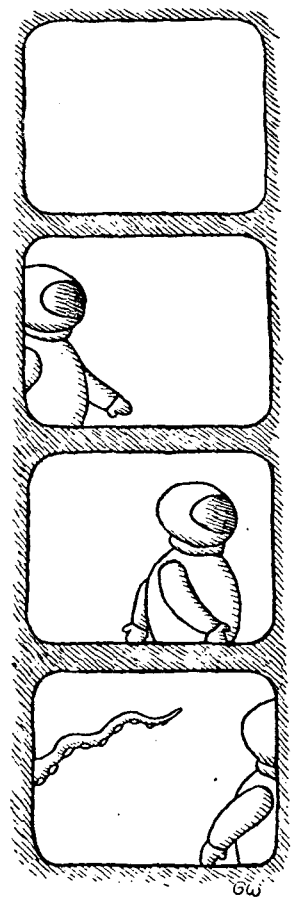
BAIRD SEARLES

# FILMS

## UFOs, Werewolves and Other Familiarities

MANY THINGS ON WHICH to report this month: in fact just about everything except a proper movie made for theater release. We lead off with three thingies made for TV, less esthetic but more practical to talk about in this space because while a movie-movie may disappear forever due to the eccentricities of film distribution, TV fodder almost invariably returns on summer reruns.

First, a series with the original title of *UFO*. It's syndicated, which means it could turn up practically anywhere on your dial, and British made, which gave me a certain amount of hope since I have great respect for British acting and theatrical sensibility (i.e. the Quartermass series, not to mention the Forsytes). After seeing two episodes, I won't swear off buying British, but must admit to some disappointment. *UFO* is competent and non-inane, but pretty dull. In 1980 the Earth is being infiltrated by UFOs, their purpose as revealed in the first episode to get human parts for their dying, sterile race. They are being fought by a super-secret organization called SHADO, secret because revelation of the truth would cause



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wide scale panic (my belief balks there; any population that has lived through the events of the last 50 years would take a lot to panic). In episode two, a young test pilot gets caught in a UFO-SHADO dog fight. Since he's aware something's up, they try to convince him that he's crackers; when that doesn't work, they take an hour to get to the conclusion that has logically occurred to every viewer in ten minutes, to draft him into SHADO.

The style is American TV-contemporary, that is few scenes over a minute long, up action and down logic. The British haven't quite mastered this style yet, which results for me in difficulty in telling anybody apart, since there are no familiar faces and many of the males wear snappy helmets or bad wigs most of the time. The special effects hardware is pretty good; it's always nice to see the things you've created in your mind's eye from sf being competently visualized for you. But the real sets and costumes are tacky; the latter look like rejects from Carnaby St. five years ago when it was already on the wane. Despite my grouching, though, *UFO* is good for an hour's time killing; it neither bored me or insulted my intelligence, the two factors that always make me want to come down hard on anything.

Movies made for TV are slowly getting better, as indicated by a couple last season. Already in this season, there are two worth noting. *Moon of the Wolf* (ABC) is from the novel of the same title, one of the most intelligent and exciting werewolf novels I've ever read, having to do with a ww in Louisiana (traditionally logical, when you think of it). Much of the book's best parts had to be cut because of sheer length, but still judging the film as a entity unto itself, it kept much of the same good qualities and added nice journeyman performances by David Janssen, Bradford Dillman and Barbara Rush as a most unlikely heroine, a sophisticated Southern belle who not only has a sense of humor and a mind of her own, but actually manages to take care of herself in the final obligatory showdown instead of fainting. This may be a first.

There was a fairly successful play of the 30s called "Outward Bound" (filmed as "Between Two Worlds") about a group of passengers on a seedy liner that turns out to be an updated ferry across the Styx. *Haunts of the Very Rich* is a further updating of the same idea. A group flown to a luxurious resort (location unknown, a sort of Moneyed Magical Mystery Tour) begin to put two and two together as things

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rapidly go to pieces in their tropical paradise. There's a touch of "No Exit" also, since they (and you) never really quite know, the ambiguity possibly making it Hell. It ends on a cynical and downbeat note, as compared to the cliched moralistic tone of "Outward Bound"; that and the ambiguity (as opposed to lack of logic) make it a rare creation for TV. A summer rerun to watch for.

Usually I toss book notes into a "literary department" afterthought, but there's something to hand worthy to be featured more prominently. Walt Lee has brought out Vol. 1 (A-F) of his monumental *Reference Guide to Fantastic Films*, and I couldn't be more impressed. An exhaustive listing of *every* film with an element of fantasy (including, of course, sf and the supernatural) and even including a separate section on films that sound fantastic but aren't, it's obviously a necessity for anyone with the slightest interest in the field. Each listing includes full credits and a brief note on the fantasy elements involved, more sensible than an attempted synopsis. Lee has managed to catalog films from as far away as India and as long ago as pre-turn-of-the-century. It's perfect for that obscure but interesting sounding film that may turn up on the late show, and frustratingly delightful to browse through. For instance, something called "The Adventures of Chinese Tarzan" appeared in 1940; there was a German Dr. Doolittle in 1928; and (a surprise to me) *Caves of Steel* had been made by the BBC in 1967. Vols. 2 and 3 will be out anon; prepub price for the set is $22.50, $28 after all three come out; Vol. 1 alone is $9.50. Orders and info (with stamped self-addressed envelope) from Walt Lee, Box 66273, Los Angeles 90066.

Late, late show dept. . . *Portrait of Jennie*, despite a large amount of treacly, 40's sentimentality, still has a breath of magic about it, if only due to its expert and exquisite photography and a surprisingly delicate performance by Jennifer Jones as the ghostly heroine. Unfortunately, the TV print doesn't turn green during the hurricane as the original did; they probably thought that viewers would think the color set had gone amok.

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William Walling's past stories for F&SF (most recently "The Sorrowful Host," December 1971) have been science fiction. In this new story, one with a contemporary, drug-culture background, he proves that he can be equally compelling with fantasy.

# The Devil We Know

## by WILLIAM WALLING

CHIP EXULTED IN TEXtures and sounds and, yes, in the smells. There before him, festive pennons and gonfalons fluttering from every buttressed wall and crenelated tower, the tourney at Camelot blazed under a smiling April sky. Minstrels in parti-colored tights roamed the greensward; jugglers kept dancing balls and rings aloft; vendors hawked cool drinks and sweetmeats among merrymakers who paused, whenever a fanfare stilled their chatter, to watch mounted knights dip streamered lances before Holy Arthur's throne, then thunder at one another along rough-timbered corridors forming the lists.

And he had the best, the greatest, most fantastic seat in the entire house, hanging here above it all, sucking it up, riding a hovering cloud which allowed both intimacy and an Olympian detachment that made him feel omnipotent, godlike.

And the colors! Man, the colors were straight from Inner Earth, from Perelandra, from Oz—by way of Peter Max: flaxen-haired chicks in low-dipping bodices; the deft brush strokes of helmet plumes, of turquoise and crimson and electric-blue banners; the sparkle of sunlight on burnished armor. And, oddly enough, the chromatic rainbow sheen that spread beneath him like a butterfly's gauzy wing, a bridge of light leading downard from his private cloud into the rapping crowd below.

Something rude and invisible nudged Chip. He flailed for balance, but the cloud offered no handhold, nothing tangible he could cling to. Suddenly he was sliding down the rainbow's frictionless shell, skidding ever faster as the shallow curve



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steepened and the turf flashed upward.

He landed with a grunt on his left buttock. Camelot's bright glory burst in a wash of mizzling raindrops. In its place, the Victorian planes and curves of Golden Gate Park's conservatory greenhouse humped above rain-slick foliage, while an umbrella handle, which—was his fuzzy-minded guess—had just jerked him from the park bench, was hooked around his elbow.

Dazed, Chip squinted upward at the blurred figure standing over him. The furled umbrella was held by a slim hand protruding from the tailored cuff of a modish raincoat worn by an unsmiling Oriental whose eyes, the color and texture of obsidian marbles, seemed engraved with tiny dollar signs rather than pupils.

"Rickshaw!" Chip shivered. "Man, you ruined my trip, Rickshaw—spoiled it!"

"You owe me," said the Oriental somberly.

"Okay, okay! Later, man, not *now*," agonized Chip. "See me tomorrow—next week!"

"I see you now, kiddy," countered Ricksaw, "and you're like glass. You owe me three bills."

"But, you gotta give me time," wheedled Chip. "Gimme a week to come up with the bread, man. I need *time.*"

Rickshaw retrieved his umbrella with an impatient wrist flick. The snap, when it ballooned over his razor-cut shock of dark hair, held a ring of finality. "Negative," he said. "I've carried you way too long, kiddy. You're over the hill, doing a fast fade. I'm closing your account."

"Over the. . ." Chip scrambled erect, pulling his hands through his tangled, shoulder-length mane, then down across his face and scruffy beard, wiping away the wet. He blinked repeatedly. "What's with this 'over the hill' bit? I'm twenty-nine—young!"

"Really?" Rickshaw looked faintly amused. "I'd have guessed ninety-two."

"Well, har-de-har-har, Rickshaw made a funny! Baby, listen to ol' Chip, will you?" He pleaded. "Haven't I always played cool with you? Grok back to the Hashbury scene—you, me, Lolly and Lurch, Blue Mattoon and Ugly Hary—"

"And. . .Gigi," observed Rickshaw.

Chip slumped. "A low blow, a cheap shot, man! You shouldn't have done that, Rickshaw. There's a time for hurtin', a time for groovin'. Sooner or later, the hurtin's got to end."

"It's just starting, for you," said Rickshaw. "The word's out; from now on, neither I nor

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any of my friends or associates will handle you."

Chip licked his lips, an icy knot forming inside him. "Rickshaw, buddy," he said quickly, "you won't cut me off—not *me*. You know I'll square with you. You know I'm good for the bundle. I'll keep you happy from now on, work for you, do anything you say. C'mon!"

Rickshaw stared into the misty distance, his face immobile. "Work for me? Thanks, but no thanks, kiddy. They'd bust you in twenty minutes. You're too much in love with the product to make an effective. . .salesman."

Chip was sweating now. The panic inside him built to immeasurable proportions, and he clutched at straws. "I. . .I'll get it up. I *swear* I'm good for it, Rickshaw. C'mon, lay just a cube or two on me, maybe a few sticks to tide me over till—"

"No chance."

"But. . .you're killin' me! How'll I pay if you cut me off?"

"Oh, one way or another I'll collect," assured Rickshaw. "I usually do. Not always in money, but. . . That's the way it is, kiddy."

"Mother of Christ, Rickshaw!"

Rickshaw studied Chip for a moment. "Look, Chip, I happen to like you. I really do. Here's how you'd play it if you were smart," he instructed calmly. "Sweat through it, get clean. Find a job of some kind—anything. Hit it straight for a while, then maybe—"

"What kinda crap is that?" Chip stepped forward half a pace, trembling. "Who needs advice from a lousy goddamn pusher? Who *needs* it?"

Rickshaw's slow smile was a pearly-toothed, beneficent promise of sympathy, understanding. "Not lousy, kiddy," he corrected gently, "the best there is. The *very* best. I'll take my leave, now. If we meet again, sometime, look the other way. I won't know you."

"Yah! So who needs ya?"

The Oriental nodded as if some privately held notion had at last been wholly confirmed. He took a small envelope from the raincoat's slash pocket and dropped it negligently on the bench. "There's a kiss-off present for you," he said in a low voice. "Enjoy it."

Rickshaw turned and sauntered up the path, his umbrella bobbing at a jaunty angle.

Numbed, Chip glared after him, then angrily ripped open the envelope. A large, gamy-looking dark capsule fell into his open palm. "A black?" he called after the retreating figure. "Is it a downer?

"Rickshaw," he shouted, "what the hell *is* it? I'm not

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poppin' anything I don't know about. Think I'm nuts?"

Rickshaw glanced back over his shoulder without breaking stride. "You'll pop, kiddy. It's good for what ails you. *Sayonara!*"

"Rickshaw, you bastard!" screamed Chip. But the Oriental had vanished behind a wall of privet. "Bastard!" he insisted. Then, in a monotone, "Slant-eyed, money-grabbin' blood-sucker who used to be. . .my friend!"

Dismayed and frightened, Chip rubbed his arms fiercely to warm himself. His suede jacket was worn shiny in places; the leather tassels dangled in uneven, grimed arrays. His threadbare Levis clung wetly to his thighs, and one moccasin had developed a prominent hole near the big toe.

Cursing the world and everyone in it, he plunged into a dewy thicket to relieve himself, and just missed getting scragged by the horseback fuzz who paraded up and down the park's pathways looking for strongarms. More of the grabbers every day—and more strongarms, too, he reflected ruefully. But now, in the drizzle, he had the park to himself. Wandering aimlessly along the hedge and down into the sunken parterre, he sagged on a bench beneath a tree that had not yet finished leafing out, hugging up to the trunk to escape the falling mist, and tried not to think about anything at all.

It didn't work—never had, and never would. Vignettes from the palmy scene at Blue Mattoon's pad surfaced in his mind like a set of glossy prints: Blue himself, all overgrown with that curly, blue-black mat the chicky babes loved to twist their fingers in and coo how it tickled when Blue made love to them, sitting in full lotus like a pudgy Buddha with his water pipe and harem, spouting *I Ching* and nodding sagely whenever Ugly Harry called out the latest pro ball score wafting over the transistor from Kezar Stadium so close-by you could hear crowd noises now and again through the shattered windows.

Blue's had been where it happened: turning-on strong, rapping with the other cats, balling all night and all day on the mattresses that covered damn near every square foot of Blue's four rooms and kitchenette. Or sitting out front on some square's fender, giving the finger to the creeps who rolled their fancy wheels down Haight on Sunday afternoons to pipe the freaks; hooting at tour buses filled with wide-eyed, fat-assed old broads from Iowa and Minnesota who put their

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hands to their mouths and looked sideways and nearly peed their pants when Lolly and Lurch strolled by with their arms around each other. Dainty Lolly, of the elfin charm and sweet disposition, and gigantic Lurch—six feet and three inches of solid, masculine femininity—big bosomed and deep voiced, with not an ounce of fat to mar that hard stevedore's body.

Then, perversely, he made a conscious effort to think of Gigi. He was surprised when the pain did not come.

That first night—her first night—at Carla's Crypt, he and Johnny had been loaded with cash after boosting the purse from a fat old dragon on Nineteenth Street who screamed and yelled so loud they could still hear her, as they ran, blocks away. Carla had mentioned a new girl—a redhead from up north somewhere—one they'd flip over, doubled and redoubled, in spades. But not even Carla could put the right words to Gigi, could describe her impudent pout, her floating cloud of flaming hair, or that unbelievably creamy skin which seems to be the exclusive property of redheads. There, with Carla's strobes flashing through the thick smoke haze, with the heavy-beat acid rock so loud it near-jellied your brain, he'd have sworn he was stoned, was imagining her intact—a five-star wet dream. But Carla wouldn't even let pot come into the Crypt, let along anything interesting.

At ten to two, when Carla yelled, "Last round, everybody!" he and Johnny had gone outside in the fog to wait for her, and the rest of that night had been some magic trip!

Up close, even with a set of threads covering that fantastic body, with her crazy hair tied carelessly back, with no make-up at all around those smoky, china-blue eyes, she'd been the wildest, most succulent chick Chip could have imagined, straight or stoned. And she'd slipped into the scene at Blue's pad like she'd been there all her life; at least six dudes had made strong moves at her, but little Gigi wasn't buying. Since that first, sidelong glance outside the Crypt, she'd had the hots only for Chipper, and he'd known it with an effortless certainty that made his bowels churn and his hands itch in anticipation.

He lingered for a moment on the new-love sweetness of their pristine, hungry bout, there in the stuffy loft above Pinky's Psychedelicatessen, when he'd simply refused to believe she was real; her aching, liquid kisses; her wriggling undulation; her permeating warmth that was deep, endless. A warmth he wanted to submerge himself in and never leave.

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Afterward, spent and lazy, he'd fished out a pair of roaches. Smiling, Gigi had taken them, shredded them, explaining, "You don't need grass; you have me," then pulled him down to cover her once more.

And those next weeks had been the cleanest, most vital, the very highest high point of his life, Chip decided; watching her wiggle under Carla's lights, stirring up the dudes; seeing her wake beside him each morning like a sleepy kitten, then grow animated after two cups of scalding coffee; hearing her argue social crap with Scratch and Colleen and Yogi and the other save-the-world dilberts who hung out around Blue's.

He'd been so damned insanely proud of her, in fact, that he'd even broken a hard-and-fast rule and taken her over to Sausalito one rainy afternoon to show her off to the homefolks. But dear dads, as usual, wasn't having any—none of his wayward son, nor of the pretty stray mouse he'd dragged in wearing love beads, a bright *rebozo*, jeans, and a dazzling smile. He remembered how astounded he'd been to hear her announce that her real name was Wanda, how his mother had nervously served coffee and those teensy sandwiches she always made, or how hard they'd all smiled. God, how hard they'd smiled!

Until it suddenly turned to crap! In no time, his mother had grown distant, acting afraid to say anything at all in front of the old man who wanted to know, finally and in no uncertain terms, when he intended to abandon his wasted life and rejoin the human race at Stanford. "There's no way to recover these years, Chip!" the old man had lectured. Right on, Daddy-O! No way!

He remembered Gigi's calmness when they'd stormed out, how he'd apologized over and over for his goof, or how hard he'd tried to make it up to her, squandering the fifty dollar bill his mother had stuffed into his pocket when she'd pecked him good-by, her eyes misted.

And that was the night Gigi had first potted with him, smiling at his surprise when she accepted the joint. He'd always known she was afraid of grass, but had lacked the sense to ask why. "I get. . .funny, Chip. I do the craziest things. It. . .scares me." He had laughed, promising to be amused at whatever she did, and then made love to her in a more intense way than ever before.

But, two weeks later, when Rickshaw had stiffed him for a good-sized bundle in addition to settling his own account, he'd found out about Gigi. "Kiddy, she's a head—a *real* head. You didn't know?"

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No, he hadn't known. Chip sighed, stirring on the wet bench beneath the drizzling, unfriendly sky. God, but she'd gone the route in one helluva hurry! Pot to acid to smack to. . . .

He shuddered and wiped his face.

"Jesus-by-beads, Louella!" said a gravelly contralto behind him. "Must've been some gull to drop a lump of crap the size of *that* one."

Chip looked around. Lolly and Lurch and a shaggy apricot poodle on a leash were standing between him and the band shell.

"Hello, Chip." Lolly smiled, still piquant, but faded somehow—older.

"Hello, Crud," echoed Lurch, looming behind her with a gap-toothed leer. "Contemplating your sins, sister?"

Chip got stiffly to his feet. The poodle decided to yap at him, then thought better of it, and retired to the sanctuary of Lurch's massive legs. "Naw, mutt," said Lurch, "don't bite the Crud. You'll fall over dead, just like everything he touches."

"Please, luv," said Lolly in a quiet voice. "How have you been, Chip? We haven't seen you in ages."

"Been. . .a long time," he said.

"Not long enough, sister," said Lurch, still grinning nastily. "This your new home? I like it; nice, practical furniture, and spacious, too. Can't say much for the air conditioning, though."

"Jus' passin' through," said Chip uneasily, feeling put upon. He had a flash of reminiscence: the many nights the three of them had lounged about, guzzling wine, rapping together easy and friendly-like. Now he felt meanness rising from the immense dyke like some poisonous vapor. "You two moved, or somethin'? Don't see you around any more."

"Bet your sweet ass we moved!" boomed Lurch. "Don't tell the Crud where we live, Louella. We've got enough troubles."

"I plain don't *care* where you live," said Chip, smarting.

"Good, good. That I do appreciate." Lurch took Lolly's arm. "Let's trot, hon. There's a sour smell in the park today."

Lolly's eyes were hooded, remorseful.

"Just. . .just a sec," Chip said, without knowing quite why he said it. "It's. . .I'd kinda like to. . ."

"Speak, lover boy, what d'you want?"

Lolly shushed her friend gently. "Seeing you again has been grand, Chip. But we do have some things to do."

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"I-I'm hurtin' for. . ." He desperately cleared his throat. "Can you. . .? Could you spare a little bread?"

Lurch's grin spread appreciatively, a knowing, filthy grin that said much more than words. "A touch? You've got the guts to tap *us?*"

"Just a little bit'll help," he said, shame-voiced.

" 'Smatter, too far gone to hustle yourself?" demanded Lurch, "or can't you get it up any more? No, wait a minute—don't tell me. Rickshaw's dumped you, hasn't he?"

Chip stood impotently, clenching and unclenching his hands.

"*Hasn't* he?"

He nodded dumbly.

"Well, well." Lurch studied him, smirking. "About time, huh? Now it comes down all over you—all the garbage. Know what they call a head without junk? A deadhead!" Lurch slapped the pocket of her jeans; a huge hand sorted loose change, and a dime flipped through the air to land at Chip's feet. "There's a crust I can spare. Spend it wisely; it'll get you past the Golden Gate Bridge turnstile and you can follow Gigi over the rail. A damned tough act to follow, sister, but maybe you've still got balls enough!"

"Lurch!" Lolly stationed herself between them.

"Go on, Crud, pick it up! It'd be the best thing you could do—for yourself or the rest of us. Better hurry, it's Friday and you may have to stand in line—"

"Stop it!" Lolly tugged vainly at Lurch's arm, causing the poodle to emit a nervous whine. Lurch succumbed, glaring at Chip with low-keyed, seething hatred.

"Peace, Brudda!" said Chip lamely.

"Up yours, Buster!" growled Lurch. Lolly's voice floated back, low and soothing. She almost seemed to be supporting Lurch as they moved off toward the Tea Garden.

He slumped on the bench, exhausted. He didn't move, or feel like moving, until the drizzle turned into a light, steady rain. Gradually, the enormous lethargy began to wear off. It was starting already; he knew it was starting—he could feel it grinding at his insides.

He had gone cold turkey once before, not long after Gigi's bummer, after a melancholy siege of adolescent soul-searching and self-pity—things he thought he'd outgrown. Cold turkey amounted to sheer agony: the arid thirst no drink could slake, the raw, die-a-thousand-deaths nerve endings, the endless retching, and the headache that threat-

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ened to tear off the top of his skull.

But he'd toughed it out, lived through it, and there was no reason why he couldn't . . . Chip stopped and considered it for a dozen heartbeats, realizing how long ago that had been—years! Christ, where had the years gone? He'd made a solemn vow during that brief month of freedom and lucidity: somehow, he would get back into Stanford, take his degree, make something of himself.

The notion made him want to laugh aloud. No way—not now! That would be the last and worst, the bottom of the barrel in alternativesville. The idea of living a square, normal, workaday existence made him want to puke—a sick, sick joke!

No, all he wanted, deep down, was something he could never have. He wanted to be the flip Chip of old, making the cool, brave Hashbury scene, knowing he was one of the real insiders on the street, mainlining with Blue and Ugly Harry and the others—and balling a real, live Gigi doll again.

Where were they now, Hashbury's ghosts? Blue had overdosed four years ago; Johnny'd had his lights put out by a nervous liquor store owner over in the Tenderloin; Ugly Harry, losing his cool during a roust, had been turned into a grinning vegetable by a three-foot Tac Squad truncheon. Lolly and Lurch were straighting—copped out all the way—and lithe, gorgeous little Gigi had made her final trip. . . .

Chip groaned. She'd been so lively and talkative that afternoon, jabbering at him about this and that, so filled with red-headed, pixie enthusiasm. Then she'd upped and gone over the rail, so they'd told him after he came around. Stoned to the eyebrows, she'd hopped the rail and gone down, down into the green, wind-whipped water, with the center span foghorn blatting in her ears—the loneliest, most forlorn sound there is on earth.

He wondered how it would be to walk out on the big orange bridge, knowing you were going to do it, to go over the rail and fall and fall. . . It couldn't possibly hurt. Not in the way he was beginning to hurt. And it would be damned quick.

Jesus, maybe Lurch was right! Follow Gigi down into the brisk chop riding in from the Pacific as the breeze quickened and all the tiny, canting sailboats tacked back toward Tiburon or the Marina—toward home.

Chip discovered that he was crying, blubbering in the dusk on a wet, lonely park bench. He struggled to his feet. Why not?

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Why put it off, now that he'd made up his mind? He shivered, jamming his hands deep into the suede jacket's sodden pockets—and found something.

He held it aloft in the gloom. It was the black monster Rickshaw had laid on him. Why not the black? What the hell did he have to lose? Chip snickered. "You'll pop, kiddy," Rickshaw had assured him. Score one for old Rickshaw!

There was a drinking fountain behind the band shell. The black was a brute; it was all he could do to choke it down, He waited a moment or two, then took another long drink. He waited some more. Nothing—no kick, no up, no down. Nothing!

Discouraged and filled with towering apprehensions, he shambled up the band shell steps and crossed to the center of the small stage. On impulse, he yelled, "Now the reason I've called you all together. . ." to rows of deserted benches lining the rain-swept parterre.

Chip doubled over, convulsed with meaningless laughter. He laughed until tears came, then dropped to the stage, still laughing, and rolled on his back with the rain pummeling his naked face.

When he sat up, some sort of demon was crouching before him sheathed in a hazy, pearly-tinted nimbus of light.

Chip blinked, rubbing the rainwater from his eyes. It was a squatty, malformed demon whose head resembled a toad's. Shiny gray-green scales covered limbs that curved in where they should have curved out, and out where they should have curved in. The demon, less than four feet tall, studied him with yellowish, reptilian eyes, clutching a wooden stylus and a small clipboard in its leftmost claw.

"Hullo, whatever you are," said Chip.

"Name?" demanded the demon in a guttural croak.

"Uh, th' name's Chip. You. . .want my full name?"

"Chip will do nicely," said the demon, writing. "We have to call you something."

"Yeah," agreed Chip, "I guess you should call me something, man. Say, who're you supposed to be?"

"Questions, questions!" rasped the demon. "They always ask questions. *I'll* ask the questions."

"Sure, sure. So, if questions tear you up, I won't ask."

"Where are you from?"

"San Francisco."

"Is that the planet, stellar system, or galactic sector?"

"Huh? It's a city, man. A city in. . . Hey, you're puttin' me on!"

" 'Puttin' me on'? No idioms, please. And don't call me 'man'!"

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"So all's groovy that ends groovy. What a crazy trip!"

"No idioms," reminded the demon sternly. "Now then, exactly how did you die?"

"Die?"

"Am I so difficult to understand? Yes, *die*, or don't you remember precisely how it happened?"

Chip tossed his shoulder-length hair with glee. "You are just about the utmost, friend," he said, giggling.

The demon snorted something in an unknown tongue. He stretched out one misshapen arm; a thin burst of flame leaped from his taloned forefinger, searing Chip's hand with white agony.

"Hey! What'n hell you think you're *doin'?*"

"No puns, either," said the demon. "Now, do we both understand who is master here?"

"I. . .uh, yeah, you betcha!"

"Then tell me exactly how and where you died," said the demon wearily.

"I didn't die," objected Chip. "Least I don't *think* so."

"Humm-m-ph! More work for me," groused the demon. "They don't give me enough to do around here without piling on a *special*. Well, I'll simply turn you over to Abaddon. He'll know what's to be done with you."

"Look, if it's just the same to you," said Chip, rubbing his hand, "maybe I'll cut for home and—"

A violent explosion battered Chip's eardrums; the acrid stench of lung-searing gases filled his nostrils and made his eyes water.

When the smoke cleared, he and the demon were standing beside a towering, incredibly well-muscled giant whose rough gray hide smoked incessantly as if a slow peat fire were burning within him. The giant seemed engrossed, intently watching the ravings and moanings of a naked man seated at a small table upon which rested an empty liquor bottle and three glasses. The man sobbed, constantly bewailing some less than obvious fate, now and then shouting incoherently at a pair of nude, strikingly lovely girls who lounged enticingly beside him.

At last the giant noticed them. "Ah, Quirt," he said. The demon groveled. "The subject out there was quite profligate," said the giant in solemn, professorial tones. "A drunkard, a phenomenal womanizer. You see, the bottle has a hole in its bottom. The nymphs do not."

"An inspired reward, m'lord Abaddon," said the demon. "A truly noble concept."

"Thank you." The giant preened himself, thoughtfully

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inspecting Chip. "What have we here?"

"I'm not sure, m'lord. A special—still living, it would seem. It's name is Chip."

"It's chilly here," complained the giant. "Let's retire to my study and get comfortable." He snapped his fingers.

Again the roar deafened Chip; he coughed at the blinding cloud of smoke.

This time, somber basalt walls rose in an enormous yet somehow claustrophobic chamber hewn from living rock. Through an open archway radiated a ruddy, volcanic glow, and an ear-splitting wall of noise—the discomfiting roar of what sounded like millions of raw, screaming throats.

The giant waved casually; a section of rock weighing thousands of tons rumbled closed to shut off the insane din. It was perhaps two hundred degrees in the chamber; Chip felt the heat rising through the soles of his moccasins. It was almost impossible to breathe.

"Ah, that's more like it," said the giant, smiling.

"You. . .cats sure ha-have a neat way of gettin' around," said Chip, choking. He was drowning in rivulets of perspiration.

"Yes, it saves steps," the giant said, seating himself at a massive desk-like block of basalt. "Now, I would like for you to picture in your mind whoever sent you to us. Just think of him; I'll do the rest."

"Well, uh, y'see Rickshaw laid this black on me—"

"Names mean nothing. Simply think of him, or her, or it, facing you squarely. I will take it from there."

"It? Uh, well, yeah. . ." Jumpy and scared, Chip dredged up a mental image of Rickshaw kissing him off back there in the park. The demon immediately fell on its face in terror.

The giant sat upright, looking intrigued. "Azazel himself," he said. "He does us great honor, Quirt."

"Great honor indeed, m'lord Abaddon."

"Up, Quirt! We must take elaborate pains to insure this subject's proper. . .reward. It would never do to have Azazel upset or disappointed."

"Most assuredly not, m'lord."

The giant leaned an elbow on the desktop, laying his tremendous chin in the palm of one horny hand. He inspected Chip with an unblinking concentration that was absolutely unnerving. "You do appreciate where you are, Chip?"

"I. . .yeah. I think I dig. . ." Chip swallowed uncomfortably, panting for air. "You fishin' for my. . .soul?"

The demon chortled. The

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giant's heavy lip curled sardonically. "Over and over, the same marvelous medieval concept," he said. "No, actually you may keep that, whatever it is. What we desire. . . .

"Tell me, Chip, are you fearful of rats?"

"Rats? Uh, not so much, I guess. There're plenty of rats in the building my pad's in."

The giant nodded. "Just a stray notion." He rose and began prowling about the chamber, his brow furrowed. "Knives—sharp instruments?"

"Huh?"

"Are you afraid of knives?"

"Oh. No, I don't think so. I carried a shiv for years."

"I understand." The giant frowned severely. "This might be much more difficult than I'd imagined. It wants just the correct touch—irony and justice combined, Quirt. Ironic justice."

"Quite so, m'lord Abaddon."

"W-wish I could help," said Chip, sweating profusely. "Hey, maybe if I kinda left you two alone. . . You know, bugged off home and let you think it over—"

"Silence!" directed the demon.

The giant ignored him, pinching the bridge of his nose in concentration. He loomed in the rock-walled chamber like some monstrous gray statue.

Then he straightened. "That might do it," he said. "That might do nicely. Follow my construct carefully, Quirt. What do you think?"

The demon scrunched in thought for a moment. "Ingenious, m'lord Abaddon," he said at last. "None but you could have *possibly* conceived such a refinement."

"It is rather good, isn't it? It's sound, both in theory and practice, and meets all of the requirements, I believe. Azazel should be pleased."

"I would say so, m'lord."

The giant snapped his fingers delightedly. "Look through that doorway, Chip. Tell me what you see."

Petrified, Chip stared at a very ordinary oaken door which had been born whole in the basalt wall. He tried to object, but his voice would not come. Some unseen force propelled him forward, and his hand reached out without his volition or consent. The knob turned; the heavy door inched open.

At first he was merely puzzled. Then, as the seconds wore by, his jaw dropped and he made strangling noises. "No!" he finally managed to scream.

"*No!*" He screamed again, louder. His screaming went on for a long, long time.

It was just after five on a

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summer evening, and huge, damp gobbets of fog were crowding in over San Francisco's skyline, borne on the cool breeze sweeping off the bay. Lolly and Lurch were walking with their dog along Montgomery Street, near Market, when Lolly spotted someone vaguely familiar leaving an emptying office building surrounded by phalanxes of other businessmen and secretaries.

"What is it, hon?" asked Lurch.

"That. . .man. The one in the tan suit. Who does he remind you of?"

Lurch shrugged. "I'll bite."

"Chip."

Lurch chuckled. "You're not serious, Louella."

"Look at the way he walks."

"Ah-h-h! You're seeing ghosts."

"Look for yourself."

The man wore horn-rimmed bifocals. A folded newspaper was tucked under his arm, and he carried a cheap plastic attache case. His rumpled suit was of an inexpensive cut; his hair was thinning, touched with gray at the temples, and he walked with a tired, resigned lope, studying the pavement beneath his feet.

"Chip?" Lolly said tentatively as he passed.

"Eh?" The man paused.

"I. . .I'm sorry. I mistook you for. . ." Lolly stifled a small sound in her throat.

The man's eyes were opaque, veiled. It was as if something was gone from them, something vital that had deserted him forever, something that made the poodle put her tail down and scuttle, whimpering, to the far end of her leash.

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## COMING NEXT MONTH

**Next month's feature story is "The Problem of Pain," a new novelet by Poul Anderson, whose "The Queen of Air and Darkness" (April 1971) recently won a Hugo award as best novella. The new Anderson is a typically fine piece about a young couple who are employed by an alien race to support a joint expedition and of the reaction, both human and alien, to love and pain and death. The February issue is on sale December 28.**

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ISAAC ASIMOV

# SCIENCE

## THE ANCIENT AND THE ULTIMATE

ABOUT THREE WEEKS AGO (as I write this) I attended a seminar in upstate New York, one that dealt with communications and society. The role assigned was a small one, but I spent four full days there so I had a chance to hear all the goings-on.*

The very first night I was there I heard a particularly good lecture by an extraordinarily intelligent and charming gentleman who was involved in the field of TV cassettes. He made out an attractive and, to my way of thinking, irrefutable case in favor of the cassettes as representing the communications wave of the future—or, anyway, one of the waves.

He pointed out that for the commercial programs intended to support the fearfully expensive TV stations and the frightfully avid advertisers, audiences in the tens of millions were an absolute necessity.

As we all know, the only things that have a chance of pleasing twenty-five to fifty million different people are those that carefully avoid giving any occasion for offense.

** Lest you think I was violating my principles by taking a vacation, I might as well tell you that I brought my hand typewriter with me, and used it, too.*

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Anything that will add spice or flavor will offend someone and lose.

So it's the unflavored pap that survives, not because it pleases, but because it gives no occasion for displeasing. (Well, some people, you and I, for instance, are displeased, but when advertising magnates add up the total number of you and me and others like us, the final sum sends them into fits of scornful laughter.)

However, cassettes which please specialized tastes are selling content only and don't have to mask it with a spurious and costly polish or the presence of a high-priced entertainment star. Present a cassette on chess strategy with chessmen symbols moving on a chessboard, and nothing else is needed to sell $x$ number of cassettes to $x$ number of chess enthusiasts. If enough is charged per cassette to cover the expense of making the tape (plus an honest profit), and if the expected number of sales are made, then all is well. There may be unexpected flops, but there may be unexpected best sellers, too.

In short, the television cassette business will rather resemble the book publishing business.

The speaker made this point perfectly clear, and when he said, "The manuscript of the future will not be a badly typed sheaf of papers but a neatly photographed sequence of images," I could not help but fidget.

Maybe the fidgeting made me conspicuous as I sat there in the front row, for the speaker then added, "And men like Isaac Asimov will find themselves outmoded and replaced."

Naturally, I jumped—and everybody laughed cheerfully at the thought of me being outmoded and replaced.

Two days later, the speaker scheduled for that evening made a trans-Atlantic call to say he was unavoidably detained in London, so the charming lady who was running the seminar came to me and asked me sweetly if I would fill in.

Naturally, I said I hadn't prepared anything, and naturally she said that it was well known that I needed no preparation to give a terrific talk, and naturally I melted at the first sign of flattery, and naturally I got up that evening, and naturally I gave a terrific talk.* It was all very natural.

I can't possibly tell you exactly what I said, because, like all my talks, it was off-the-cuff, but, as I recall, the essence was something like this—

* *Well, everybody said so.*

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The speaker of two days before had spoken of TV cassettes and had given a fascinating and quite brilliant picture of a future in which cassettes and satellites dominated the communications picture, and I was now going to make use of my science fiction expertise to look still further ahead and see how cassettes could be further improved and refined, and made still more sophisticated.

In the first place, the cassettes, as demonstrated by the speaker, needed a rather bulky and expensive piece of apparatus to decode the tape, to place images on a television screen, and to put the accompanying sound on a speaker.

Obviously, we would expect this auxiliary equipment to be made smaller, lighter, and more mobile. Ultimately, we would expect it to disappear altogether and become part of the cassette itself.

Secondly, energy is required to convert the information contained in the cassette into image and sound, and this places a strain on the environment. (All use of energy does that, and while we can't avoid using energy, there is no value in using more than we must.)

Consequently, we can expect the amount of energy required to translate the cassette to decrease. Ultimately we would expect it to reach a value of zero and disappear.

Therefore, we can imagine a cassette which is completely mobile and self-contained. Though it requires energy in its formation, it requires no energy and no special equipment for its use thereafter. It needn't be plugged into the wall; it needs no battery replacements; it can be carried with you wherever you feel most comfortable about viewing it—in bed, in the bathroom, in a tree, in the attic.

A cassette as ordinarily viewed makes sounds, of course, and casts light. Naturally, it should make itself plain to you in both image and sound, but for it to obtrude on the attention of others, who may not be interested, is a flaw. Ideally, the self-contained mobile cassette should be seen and heard only by you.

No matter how sophisticated the cassettes now on the market, or those visualized for the immediate future, they do require controls. There is an on-off knob or switch, and others to regulate color, volume, brightness, contrast and all that sort of thing. In my vision, I want to make such controls operated, as far as possible, by the will.

I foresee a cassette in which the tape stops as soon as you remove your eye. It remains stopped till you bring your eye back,

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at which point it begins to move again immediately. I foresee a cassette which plays its tape quickly or slowly, forward or backward, by skips, or with repetitions, entirely at will.

You'll have to admit that such a cassette would be a perfect futuristic dream: self-contained, mobile, non-energy-consuming, perfectly private, and largely under the control of the will.

Ah, but dreams are cheap and so let's get practical. Can such a cassette possibly exist? To this, my answer is: Yes, of course.

The next question is: How many years will we have to wait for such a deliriously perfect cassette?

I have that answer, too, and quite a definite one. We will have it in minus five thousand years—because what I have been describing (as perhaps you have guessed) is the book!

Am I cheating? Does it seem to you, O Gentle Reader, that the book is *not* the ultimately refined cassette, for it presents words only, and no image; that words without images are somehow one-dimensional and divorced from reality; that we cannot expect to get information by words alone concerning a universe which exists in images.

Well, let's consider that. Is the image more important than the word?

Certainly, if we consider man's purely physical activities, the sense of sight is by far the most important way in which he gathers information concerning the universe. Given my choice of running across rough country with my eyes blindfolded and all my other senses sharp, or with my eyes open and my other senses out of action, I would certainly use my eyes. In fact with my eyes closed, I would move at all only with the greatest caution.

*But* at some early stage in man's development, he invented speech. He learned how to modulate his expired breath, and how to use different modulations of sound to serve as agreed-upon symbols of material objects and actions and—far more important—of abstractions.

Eventually he learned to encode modulated sounds into markings that could be seen by the eye and translated into the corresponding sound in the brain. A book, I need not tell you, is a device that contains what we might call "stored speech."

It is speech that represents the most fundamental distinction between man and all other animals (except possibly the dolphin—which may conceivably have speech, but has never worked out a system for storing it).

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Not only does speech, and the potential capacity to store speech, differentiate man from all other species of life that have lived now or in the past, but it is something all men have in common. All known groups of human beings, however "primitive" they may be, can and do speak, and can and do have a language. Some "primitive" peoples have very complex and sophisticated languages, I understand.

What's more, all human beings who are even nearly normal in mentality learn to speak at an early age.

With speech the universal attribute of mankind, it becomes true that more information reaches us—as *social* animals—through speech than through images.

The comparison isn't even close. Speech and its stored forms (the written or printed word) are so overwhelmingly a source of the information we get that without it we are helpless.

To see what I mean, let's consider a television program, since that ordinarily involves both speech and image, and let's ask ourselves what happens if we do without the one or the other.

Suppose you darken the picture and allow the sound to remain. Won't you still get a pretty good notion of what's going on? There may be spots rich in action and poor in sound that may leave you frustrated by dark silence, but if it were anticipated that you would not see the image, a few lines could be added and you would miss nothing.

Indeed, radio got by on sound alone. It used speech and "sound effects." This meant that there were occasional moments when the dialogue was aritificial to make up for the lack of image: "There comes Harry now. Oh, he doesn't see the banana. Oh, he's stepping on the banana. There he goes." By and large, though, you could get along. I doubt that anyone listening to radio seriously missed the absence of image.

Back to the TV tube, however. Now turn off the sound and allow the vision to remain untouched—in perfect focus and full color. What do you get out of it? Very little. Not all the play of emotion on the face, not all the impassioned gestures, not all the tricks of the camera as it focuses here and there is going to give you more than the haziest notion of what is going on.

Corresponding to radio, which is only speech and miscellaneous sound, there were the silent movies, which were only images. In the absence of sound and speech, the actors in the silent films had to "emote." Oh, the flashing eyes; oh, the hands at the throat, in the air, raised to heaven; oh, the fingers pointing trustingly to

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heaven, firmly to the floor, angrily to the door; oh, the camera moving in to show the banana skin on the floor, the ace in the sleeve, the fly on the nose. And with every extreme of inventiveness of visualization in its most exaggerated form, what did we have every fifteen seconds? An utter halt to the action, while words flashed on the screen.

This is not to say that one cannot communicate after a fashion by vision alone—by the use of pictorial images. A clever pantomimist like Marcel Marceau or Charlie Chaplin or Red Skelton can do wonders—but the very reason we watch them and applaud is that they to do so much with so poor a medium as pictorialization.

As a matter of fact, we amuse ourselves by playing charades and trying to have someone guess some simple phrase which we "act out." It wouldn't be a successful game if it didn't require much ingenuity, and, even so, practitioners of the game work up sets of signals and devices which (whether they know it or not) take advantage of the mechanics of speech.

They divide words into syllables, they indicate whether a word is short or long, they use synonyms and "sounds like." In all this, they are using visual images to *speak*. Without using any trick that involves any of the properties of speech, but simply by gesture and action alone, can you get across as simple a sentence as "Yesterday the sunset was beautiful in rose and green"?

Of course a movie camera can photograph a beautiful sunset and you can point to that. This involves a great investment of technology, however, and I'm not sure that it will tell you that the sunset was like that *yesterday* (unless the film plays tricks with calendars, which represent a form of speech).

Or consider this. Shakespeare's plays were written to be acted. The image was of the essence. To get the full flavor you must see the actors and what they are doing. How much do you miss if you go to "Hamlet" and close your eyes and merely listen? How much do you miss if you plug your ears and merely look?

Having made clear my belief that a book, which consists of words but no images, loses very little by its lack of images and has therefore every right to be considered an extremely sophisticated example of a television cassette, let me change my ground and use an even better argument.

Far from lacking the image, a book *does* have images, and, what's more, far better images, because personal, than any that

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can possibly be presented to you on television.

When you are reading an interesting book, are there no images in your mind? Do you not see all that is going on, in your mind's eye?

Those images are *yours.* They belong to you and to you alone, and they are infinitely better for you than those wished on you by others.

I saw Gene Kelly in "The Three Musketeers" once (the only version I ever saw that was reasonably faithful to the book). The sword fight between D'Artagnan, Athos, Porthos, and Aramis on one side and the five men of the Cardinal's Guard on the other, which occurs near the beginning of the picture, was absolutely beautiful. It was a dance of course, and I reveled in it. But Gene Kelly, however talented a dancer he might be, does not happen to fit the picture of D'Artagnan that I have in my mind's eye, and I was unhappy all through the picture because it did violence to *my* "The Three Musketeers."

This is not to say that sometimes an actor might not just happen to match your own vision. Sherlock Holmes in my mind just happens to be Basil Rathbone. In *your* mind, however, Sherlock Holmes might *not* be Basil Rathbone; he might be Dustin Hoffman, for all I know. Why should all our millions of Sherlock Holmeses have to be fitted into a single Basil Rathbone?

You see, then, why a television program, however excellent, can never give as much pleasure, be as absorbing, fill so important a niche in the life of the imagination, as a book can. To the television program we need only bring an empty mind, and sit torpidly while the display of sound and image fills us, requiring nothing of our imagination. If others are watching, they are filled to the brim in precisely the same way, all of them, and with precisely the same sounding images.

The book, on the other hand, demands cooperation from the reader. It insists he take part in the process.

In doing so, it offers an interrelationship that is made to order by the reader himself for the reader himself, one that most neatly fits his own peculiarities and idiosyncracies.

When you read a book, you create your own images, you create the sound of various voices, you create gestures, expressions, emotions. You create *everything* but the bare words themselves. And if you take the slightest pleasure in creation, the book has given you something the television program can't.

Furthermore, if ten thousand people read the same book at the

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same time, each nevertheless creates his own images, his own sound of the voice, his own gestures, expressions, emotions. It will be not one book but ten thousand books. It will not be the product of the author alone, but the product of the interaction of the author and each of the readers separately.

What, then, can replace the book?

I admit that the book may undergo changes in non-essentials. It was once hand-written, and it is now printed. The technology of publishing the printed book has advanced in a hundred ways, and in the future, a book may be turned out electronically from a television set in your house.

In the end, though, you will be alone with the printed word, and what can replace it?

Is all this wishful thinking? Is it because I make my living out of books that I don't want to accept the fact that books may be replaced? Am I just inventing ingenious arguments to console myself?

Not at all. I am certain books will not be replaced in the future, because they have not been replaced in the past.

To be sure, many more people watch television than read books, but that is not new. Books were *always* a minority activity. Few people read books before television, and before radio, and before anything you care to name.

As I said, books are demanding and require creative activity on the part of the reader. Not everyone, in fact, darned few are ready to give what is demanded, so they don't read, and they *won't* read. They are not there to be lost just because the book fails them somehow; they are lost by nature.

In fact, let me make the point that reading itself is difficult; inordinately difficult. It is not like talking, which every halfway normal child learns without any program of conscious teaching. Imitation beginning at the age of one will do the trick.

Reading, on the other hand, must be carefully taught and, usually, without much luck.

The trouble is that we mislead ourselves by our own definition of "literacy." We can teach almost anyone (if we try hard enough and long enough) to read traffic signs and to make out instructions and warnings on posters, and to puzzle out newspaper headlines. Provided the printed message is short and reasonably simple and the motivation to read it is great—almost everyone can read.

And if this is called "literacy," then almost every American is

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"literate." But if you then begin to wonder why so few Americans read books (the average American, I understand, does not even read one complete book a year), you are being misled by your own use of the term "literate."

Few people who are literate in the sense of being able to read a sign that says "No Smoking" ever become so familiar with the printed word and so at ease with the process of quickly decoding by eye the small and complicated shapes that stand for modulated sounds, that they are willing to tackle any extended reading task—as, for instance, making their way through one thousand consecutive words.

Nor do I think it's entirely a matter of the failure of our educational system (though heaven knows it's a failure). No one expects that if you teach every child how to play baseball, they will all be talented baseball players; or that every child taught how to play the piano will be a talented pianist. We accept, in almost every field of endeavor, the notion of a "talent" that can be encouraged and developed but cannot be created from nothing.

Well, in my view, reading is a "talent," too. It is a very difficult activity. Let me tell you how I discovered that.

When I was a teen-ager, I sometimes read comic magazines, and my favorite character, if you're interested, was Scrooge McDuck. In those days, comic magazines cost ten cents, but of course I read them for nothing off my father's newsstand. I used to wonder, though, how anyone would be so foolish as to pay ten cents when, by simply glancing through the magazine for two minutes at the newsstand, he could read the whole thing.

Then one day on the subway to Columbia University, I found myself hanging from a strap in a crowded car with nothing handy to read. Fortunately the teenage girl seated in front of me was reading a comic magazine. Something is better than nothing, so I arranged myself so I could look down on the pages and read along with her. (Fortunately, I can read upside down as easily as right side up.)

Then after a few seconds, I thought: Why doesn't she turn the page?

She did eventually. It took minutes for her to finish each double-page spread, and as I watched her eyes going from one panel to the next and her lips carefully mumbling the words, I had a flash of insight.

What she was doing was what I would be doing if I were faced with English words written phonetically in the Hebrew, Greek, or

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Cyrillic alphabet. Knowing the respective alphabets dimly, I would have to first recognize each letter, then sound it, then put them together, then recognize the word. Then I would have to pass on to the next word and do the same. Then, when I had done several words this way, I would have to go back and try to get them in combination.

You can bet that under those circumstances, I would do very little reading. The *only* reason I read is that when I look at a line of print I see it all as words and at once.

And the difference between the reader and the non-reader grows steadily wider with the years. The more a reader reads, the more information he picks up, the larger his vocabulary grows, the more familiar various literary allusions become. It becomes steadily easier and more fun for him to read, while for the non-reader, it becomes steadily harder and less worthwhile.

The result of this is that there are and *always have been* (whatever the state of supposed "literacy" in a particular society) both readers and non-readers, with the former making up a tiny minority of, I guess, less than 1 percent.

I have estimated that 400,000 Americans have read some of my books (out of a population of 200,000,000), and I am considered, and consider myself, a successful writer. If a particular book should sell 2,000,000 copies in all its American editions, it would be a remarkable best seller—and all it would mean would be that 1 percent of the American population had managed to nerve themselves to buy it. Of that total, moreover, I'm willing to bet that at least half would manage to do no more than stumble through some of it in order to find the dirty parts.

Those people, those non-readers, those passive receptacles for entertainment are terribly fickle. They will switch from one thing to another in the eternal search for some device that will give them as much as possible and ask of them as little as possible.

From minstrels to theatrical performances; from the theater to the movies; from the silents to the talkies; from black-and-white to color; from the record player to the radio and back; from the movies to television to color television to cassettes.

What does it matter?

But through it all, the faithful less-than-1-percent minority stick to the books. Only the printed word can demand as much from them; only the printed word can force creativity out of them; only the printed word can tailor itself to their needs and

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desires; only the printed word can give them what nothing else can.

The book may be ancient, but it is also the ultimate, and the reader will never be seduced away from it. They will remain a minority, but they will *remain.*

So despite what my friend said in his speech on cassettes, writers of books will never be outmoded and replaced. Writing books may be no way to get rich (oh, well, what's money!), but as a profession, it will always be there.

## F&SF WINS FOURTH STRAIGHT HUGO

The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction has been presented the Hugo award for best science fiction magazine of the year. This is the fourth consecutive year that the magazine has won the award.

The Hugo award—named after Hugo Gernsback, the father of modern science fiction—is the annual achievement award of the World Science Fiction Convention. The 1972 awards were presented at the convention's 30th annual meeting, held in Los Angeles over the Labor Day weekend.

Other Hugos awarded included: Best Novel, TO YOUR SCATTERED BODIES GO by Philip Jose Farmer; Best Novella, "The Queen of Air and Darkness" by Poul Anderson (F&SF, April 1971) and Best Short Story, "Inconstant Moon" by Larry Niven.

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The theme of man venturing out to the stars, there to be tested by their Galactic neighbors, is a basic one in sf. Mr. Morressy offers a fresh and compelling variation in this story about the crew of Seeker III, fugitives from a dying Earth.

# When the Stars Threw Down Their Spears

by JOHN MORRESSY

THE SUN FELL AWAY BEHIND them, into the anonymous brilliance of a million stars, and *Seeker III* sped out beyond the orbit of Pluto to plunge irrevocably into the great gulf. The long voyage was under way.

Within the ship, all went smoothly. One by one the crew completed their assignments, submitted final reports, and withdrew to the cryotanks. At the end of six weeks in space, only Commander Ross and First Officer McClendon remained at their posts. On the forty-fifth day, Ross made the final adjustment, closed the last circuit, and looked up at his first officer.

"That does it," he said. "From here on, it's all up to the hardware. Ready to turn in, Mac?"

"Ready as I'll ever be. I wish I could be as casual as you are about it."

"I can't get worked up about going to sleep."

"Not even a deep-freeze two-hundred-year sleep?"

"Two hundred and two years," Ross corrected him, reading off a bank of dials on the panel before him, "fifty-seven days, and six hours. Not even for that, Mac. We'll go to sleep, and tomorrow morning we'll wake up at dawn, May 4, 2211, in orbit around our new home."

"Just like that, eh?"

"If anything goes wrong, we won't know it."

McClendon grunted noncommittally. "At least we'll wake up smarter. I'm looking forward to hearing what they've got programmed for us."



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"Don't expect too much," Ross warned him. "They've got a lot of hard teaching to do. We have to learn everything."

"Just like the Academy, except that we're allowed to sleep through the lectures. I suppose they even built in homework assignments."

"I'm sure they did."

McClendon looked at the commander and said, somewhat shyly, "I asked them to give me a lot of music. I've always wanted to know more about good music, but I never had the time on Earth."

"You've got it now."

McClendon nodded. "Two hundred years from now—tomorrow morning—I'll know more about music than any man who ever lived. That's a hell of a thought, isn't it?" He paused, and then said, "I wonder if there'll still be anyone. . ."

"There's nearly half a billion people alive back there, and they're doing all right," Ross said sharply. "We built the *Seeker*, didn't we?"

"We've built spaceships before. I'm wondering if they can find a way to survive the radiation."

"They will. Man can do anything, if he knows his survival depends on it."

"Almost anything," McClendon corrected him in a thoughtful voice. "And if they don't, it's all up to us. Makes you feel like Noah, doesn't it? Let's hit the tanks, Commander."

Ross rose from his place at the control panel and started for the midsection of the ship where the cryotanks were located, McClendon falling in behind him. Even aside from their identical coveralls, the men were quite similar in their physical appearance. McClendon was slightly taller and heavier than Ross and his hair was reddish-brown while the commander's was grey-streaked black, but in expression, movement, and gesture the two were as alike as brothers. They swung into the chamber where the thirty-six oversized translucent eggs hung, the man-made wombs in which the stellar pioneers were to spend the next two centuries. Ross floated a clipboard across to McClendon and said, "Final check, Mac. First the—"

## II

The crew of *Seeker III* stood in a square blue-white room of uncertain dimensions. Seated before them at a smooth white table was a pale-haired man wearing an expression of all-encompassing benevolence. He rose, smiled genially on the stunned, silent gathering of men and women, and extended his arms in greeting.

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"Welcome, all of you, welcome," he said warmly in perfect English, oddly unaccented. "We're so glad you've arrived at last. I am Eleven."

Ross motioned to the others for silence. "Where are we? We were aboard. . .how did we get here?" he demanded.

"All your questions will be answered in a very short time, Commander Ross. For now, let me assure you that you, your crew, and your ship are safe. You have absolutely no cause for concern," the man said, beaming at them like a proud relation, looking from one astonished face to another and somehow providing a sense of security by the very benevolence he seemed to radiate.

Ross noticed for the first time that he and his companions were no longer dressed as they had been aboard the ship. In some inexplicable manner, their coveralls had been replaced by one-piece camouflage garments similar to those worn by ground troops in the Silent Wars. All were armed. The women had daggers hanging from their belts. Each man wore a pair of pistols. Ross drew one and inspected it closely. It was a Colt .45, fully loaded, in perfect condition.

"I trust you approve of the weapons, Commander Ross?" Eleven said pleasantly, raising his voice above the renewed murmuring of the group. "We've done our best to please you. Three will be with us shortly, and he'll explain everything. Meanwhile, I'll complete your weapons issue. I know how much it means to your people to be fully armed."

He stepped back to the wall and touched it gently. A panel swung wide, disclosing an eccentric museum of weaponry. Hand lasers, M-67 rifles and M-9 carbines, automatic rifles and submachine guns were hung or stacked beside broadswords, tomahawks, crossbows, blowguns, maces, and other more exotic implements of destruction quite unfamiliar to the crew of *Seeker III.* Eleven gestured to the display and said, "There you are, my friends. Something to suit you all."

"Wait a minute," Ross said, leveling the pistol at him. "I want some information, and I want it now."

"Three will tell you everything, Commander," Eleven assured him. "I'm not permitted to give information. My task is to see that you're properly armed and outfitted. Now, if you'll make your selection of supplementary weapons. . .I suggest a hand laser and carbine for each of the women. They're light, but very effective. The men may prefer heavier weapons. Of course, the choice is yours. You need take

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no weapons at all, if you prefer."

Eleven spoke on calmly and pleasantly, as if oblivious to the pistol aimed at his midsection. Olsen, the communications officer, moved unobtrusively to Eleven's other side and glanced at the commander. Ross caught the suggestion, holstered his weapon, and responded with a slight nod. The two men lunged for their host, and collided heavily as he vanished from between them.

Ross, Olsen, and the rest of the crew drew their weapons and scanned the room in which they now stood alone. Ross jerked a thumb at the weapons cabinet. "Olsen, Carver, McClendon," he snapped, "start handing out those weapons. Everything we can carry. The rest of you, as soon as you get a weapon, fan out and start looking this place over. We have to find out—"

"Please, my friends, please," Eleven said. He was at his place behind the table, and his voice was unruffled, placating, as though he feared to injure by his tone. "There is no need for alarm. I neglected to tell you, Commander, violence is not possible against the Overseers. Your weapons will not work against us."

Ross turned his pistol directly on Eleven's chest. "Suppose I test that?"

"Please do, if it will put your mind at rest. Go ahead, Commander," Eleven urged, spreading his arms wide in invitation.

Ross raised his pistol to eye level and aimed at the pale-haired man's chest just below the breastbone. "Don't shoot him, Commander!" McClendon blurted, starting forward. Olsen checked him, and Eleven said pleasantly, "I thank you for your concern, Mr. McClendon, but it is unnecessary. Please proceed, Commander."

Ross resumed his aim, hesitating for just an instant, and then squeezed the trigger. Three shots exploded in the room, and Eleven stood smiling before him. As Ross lowered his pistol, a burst of fire from Olsen's automatic rifle poured into Eleven. Still he stood in his place, his expression calm, satisfied, as though a necessary ritual had been observed.

"Good, very good. Now you can see I told you the truth," he said.

"Why bother to give us weapons, if they're useless?" Ross asked.

"Oh, your weapons are not useless, Commander. All the weapons are quite serviceable, but they cannot be turned against us. You will find them sufficient for your purposes."

"What purposes?"

Eleven looked to a point

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behind them. "Three will tell you all you wish to know. Welcome, Three."

A tall, husky man, taller and broader than the biggest of the crew, stepped through the group and stopped before them. He was dressed much like Eleven, in a short, loose-fitting garment of pure white, vaguely similar to a Grecian tunic. He resembled Eleven, but his manner and bearing were more forceful, and he spoke and acted with greater assurance. It was no more possible to estimate his age than Eleven's, or even to be certain which of the two men was the elder.

"All goes well?" he asked Eleven.

"Oh, yes. As you see, I've outfitted our guests and provided them with weapons."

"Have they tried the weapons?"

"They have, at my urging," Eleven said.

Three turned his attention to the crew of the *Seeker III*. Ross made a half step forward, as if to speak, but a glance from Three stopped him in his tracks. He drew back, still silent, and waited for the newcomer to speak.

"We welcome the visitors from Earth. We have long followed your progress to the limits of your system, and now that you have taken the first step in travel among the stars, we greet you on behalf of your galactic neighbors," Three said solemnly.

A soft, astonished gasp rose from the collective throats of the crew. Three smiled and looked to Eleven, who nodded benignly, then he went on, "Yes, neighbors. Although your system is barren and lifeless now except for your home planet, you share this galaxy with a thousand other races."

A babble of excited talk burst from the thirty-six crew members, and after a moment, a barrage of questions filled the room. Three raised his hands for order and said, "I know you have many questions, and I hope to answer them all. We will continue in—

"—more comfortable surroundings," he concluded, and they found themselves instantaneously transported, for the second time, to a new place. They were now in a spacious domed chamber of cold white, the floors strewn with soft cushions, low tables of fragrant food and decanters of liquid placed handily about. There had been no sensation of motion, no perceptible transition from place to place, no passage of time; they had simply ceased to be in one location and begun to be in another, without interruption, just as they had passed from the ship to the blue-white room.

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The crew fell silent. Three waved them to their seats and stepped upon a raised platform before them.

"You will find the food and beverages compatible with your body chemistry and, we trust, pleasing to your taste. I suggest that you take some time now to confer among yourselves so that our discussion may proceed in an orderly and fruitful manner. I will return in one hour," Three said, and at once disappeared.

Ross turned to McClendon. "What do you think, Mac?"

" 'A stately pleasure-dome in caves of ice,' " McClendon murmured.

"What's that?"

"This place reminds me of something I read. Coleridge... maybe Blake. It's like a palace made of ice."

"Let's forget the poetry, Mac. What about these characters?"

"It looks to me as though we've hit pay dirt. We came out here to find a new Earth, and it appears that the galaxy is full of them. We may not even need spaceships. These people can send us anywhere we want to go just by waving a wand."

"Correction: anywhere *they* want us to go," Olsen said. "Remember, they call themselves Overseers."

"All right. But so far they seem friendly enough."

"We still don't know who they are, how many they are, or how and why they brought us here," Ross pointed out.

McClendon's wife added, "We don't know how long they'll keep us here, either. And what's become of the ship?"

"They might want us for slaves."

"No, not slaves. They don't need slaves."

"Maybe as pets, then."

"Or laboratory specimens."

"Let's stop the wild guessing," McClendon said. "They haven't hurt us yet. We'll ask Three what's going on. If his answers are satisfactory, we have nothing to worry about."

"Suppose they're not?" Ross asked.

"Then we're in trouble. I don't know how you fight somebody who can disappear whenever he likes. Shall I assemble everyone, so we can start working up a list of questions?"

"Right, Mac," Ross said.

Three reappeared promptly and took his place in their midst. He answered their questions directly and fully, with no attempt at evasion, explaining in detail whenever an explanation was called for. As the situation was made clear, the pioneers grew more relaxed.

"Then we're in a sort of quarantine, is that it?" Ross asked.

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"Exactly right, Commander. With so many different life forms in the galaxy, the danger of mutual infection, with possibly tragic consequences, is ever present. In the earliest days of interstellar travel, entire cultures were wiped out by plagues carried by unsuspecting travelers. The duty of the Overseers is to avoid such calamities and to assist you in establishing harmonious relations with other races."

"Do they all resemble us as much as you do?" Singer, the medical officer, asked.

"Humanoid form is widespread, but it is not the norm," Three replied. "There seems to be no norm. Our practice is to receive newcomers with Overseers of similar bodily configuration. If your first encounter with extrasystemic life had been with, say, the Tyrax-Emaqqa, or the Trelln, the shock might have been too great on both sides. These are noble races—the Trelln are among the most gifted architects in the galaxy—but their appearance is somewhat startling when one is unprepared."

"I take it you're going to prepare us, then," Ross asked.

"That is our mission."

"And how long will it take?"

"A difficult question, Commander. It depends on native intelligence, adaptability, physiology, empathy. . .but considering the rate of progress your race has shown in recent generations, I would say that your stay here might well be a short one. We can not be certain until we begin."

"I hope it's short. Now that we know there are intelligent beings out there, we want to meet them. We have a lot to learn," Ross said.

"Indeed you do, Commander, and we will do our best to teach you."

A faint suggestion of irony in Three's otherwise friendly voice caused Ross to exchange glances with McClendon and Singer. The others appeared unperturbed, and Ross turned to Three to see if his expression betrayed a subtle meaning underlying his words. His eyes never met their host's.

## III

Landfall came on a planet that looked like a madman's sketch of Hell. Three fourths of its surface was covered with a turbulent blood-black sea, bubbling thickly, frothing, teeming with monstrous life; the remaining quarter huddled in gnarled land masses that thrust upward to a low horizon of truncated volcanic cones spewing molten fire and ash into the murky sky. The air was heavy and dim and reeked of sulfur.

Ross wiped the perspiration

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from his brow, sighed deeply, and turned to Singer. "What's the report?" he asked.

"Gravity about 1.6 Earth. Mean temperature 130 degrees. The air stinks, but it's breathable."

"What a place to land," Ross muttered.

"Better than drifting in space. We had no choice," McClendon said.

"Our water's nearly gone."

"This stuff can be purified," Singer said.

"What about food?" McClendon asked.

"Fish are edible. No sign of plant or animal life."

McClendon nodded. It was difficult to talk, difficult to move about in the heat and heavy gravity and thick atmosphere. A half hour's work had the strongest men staggering with fatigue. The three sat on the ground, drawn instinctively to the deceptive shade of the rude shelter's overhanging roof, a shade that was only a deeper gloom under the shrouded sky, offering no relief from the pervading oppression of the heat.

"We can survive," Ross said suddenly. "We'll make it."

"Some of us, maybe," Singer said.

No one spoke for a time. The only sound was the labored breathing of the three men. They sat motionless, their minds adrift in a dulled Sargasso of vague memories. They had so much to do, so many people depending on them, but their strength was drained, their minds muddled. Six of their number lay sick and helpless with no one able to care for them. The others grew weaker each day.

They turned listlessly at the scuffling of weary footsteps. Crewman Keneshaw joined them and sank to the ground exhausted from his labors.

"How are the lifeships?" Ross asked.

Keneshaw shook his head once. He gulped in great gasping breaths before speaking. "Won't fly again. Might salvage. . .make refrigerating units."

Singer shook his head wearily. "Water purifiers," he said.

"I'll try."

Leaden days dragged by, time itself seeming sluggish in the unvarying half-light of the slowly rotating planet. Keneshaw, McClendon, and three other crewmen drove themselves mercilessly and at last succeeded in constructing an apparatus to purify the planet's water, but the device came too late to save the lives of their companions. Seven crew members died, Singer's wife among them, and others took their places in the crude dispensary fashioned from the wreckage of

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the *Seeker III*'s lifeships. The surviviors were rationed to twelve ounces of bitter brownish water a day.

Still the planet took its toll. The number of survivors fit to work dwindled steadily, and a time came when only five men were able to function. They cared for the sick, prepared the meals, and for most of their waking hours sat by the water purifier, watching the slow fall of drops that measured out their lives. A day came when the flow faltered.

The five survivors stood like pale leathery skeletons around the water purifier. Seven of their companions lay helpless in their shelters. The dispensary, now a tomb, had been sealed off.

They stared at the blood-colored fluid oozing drop by sluggish drop into the waiting receptacle. The intervals between the drops grew longer. Keneshaw crouched beside the purifier, tugged at a connection, and looked up at them helplessly.

"Clogged," he said. "Can't keep it clear."

"How much?" Ross asked, his voice a dry croaking whisper.

"A quart a day. Until it breaks down."

"What about the sick?" McClendon asked.

Ross breathed deeply, gasping in the heat, and shook his head. "Can't help them."

"My wife. . .*your* wife," McClendon said.

"Have to save. . .ourselves."

"For what?"

Olsen moved between them. He pointed a shriveled hand at McClendon in accusation. "He's been stealing. . .our water. . . giving it to them," he said haltingly.

"No," Singer said. "He gave her his own share."

"Lie!" Olsen's voice rasped. "He stole our water!"

"Didn't steal. . . I gave. . .," McClendon forced from deep in his dry throat. He could not finish. Spreading his hands helplessly in a mute appeal, he turned toward Olsen, who stepped back and drew his hand laser. As McClendon lurched forward, Olsen fired once, and a beam hissed through McClendon's chest. He crumpled and fell.

Keneshaw lunged at Olsen, throwing an arm around his neck and seizing his gun hand. They scuffled and crashed heavily into the purifier. Olsen tore himself free and stumbled outside, dodging Keneshaw's wild shots.

Singer knelt over McClendon. He looked up and whispered, "Dead." Ross and Keneshaw did not hear. They stared at the wreckage of the water purifier and the over-

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turned receptacle. The water had soaked into the ground without leaving a trace. Keneshaw dropped to his knees before the twisted metal, as if in worship, groaning and whimpering wordlessly. He stopped abruptly, tried to rise, then pitched forward. Ross knelt beside him and felt for a pulse. He turned to Singer. "He's dead, too," he said.

The two men sprawled on the dry ground and waited for the end to come.

## IV

Olsen pushed through the foliage and stood before him, his camouflage suit dark with perspiration, his eyes narrowed against the glare of the midday sun. Faint shouts and the sound of hammers and saws came from the hilltop.

"The first shelter is finished, Commander," Olsen said. "Will you be up to inspect it?"

"Go ahead, Olsen," Ross said. "I'll be right behind you."

Ross followed the crewman up the newly cleared path, his mind still full of the events of the past few days. They were as clear and fresh in his memory as if they had occurred only seconds before: the awakening, after a sleep of centuries, to the sight of a blue-green cloud-mottled planet below them; the first overflight and the descent to this island, where water and building material abounded, and the soil was rich and black. They had no idea where they were, and no immediate hope of finding out. But despite the inexplicable corrosion of much of their equipment, they had survived the long voyage without a casualty, without even a minor injury, and landed on a planet that seemed to offer everything they needed to stay alive, to prosper and to grow. It was New Earth, their home, a place to begin again.

With shelters built and planting begun, the pioneers undertook the task of exploration. Each day brought more exciting discoveries. The planet teemed with edible plants and small animals. They were named for their closest terrestrial counterparts, and soon the settlers were referring to wheat and corn, to cows, pigs, and sheep, as casually as they would have at home. The planet contained no bird life, but a small oviparous mammal was found and tamed, and eggs soon became a staple of the diet. A large, docile, ox-like creature of great strength was domesticated and used as a draft animal. Crops grew well and required little care. Soon the compound had expanded to include stables and barns for the livestock, sheds for the equipment, and silos for stor-

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age. The outbuildings gave the settlement the appearance of a busy and prosperous town.

The scouting expeditions revealed that the planet was approximately two-thirds water, with few small islands like their own. The primary land masses were the size of small continents, spaced at equal intervals over the surface of the planet. They found no evidence of human life and no sign that it had ever existed on the planet. New Earth, this haven in space, was theirs uncontested.

On the first anniversary of their landing, the colony numbered forty. On the fifth anniversary, they had grown to sixty-five. Thirty-one of these were children. Of the thirty-six original colonists, all were still living except the Chaneys, killed when their scout ship crashed at sea during a storm. Their children were taken in by the McClendons, and raised along with their own son and daughter.

Life in the colony was harmonious during the early years. All problems were resolved at monthly village meetings, and most of the decisions were unanimous. For five years things progressed smoothly, and then, at a meeting early in the sixth year, McClendon raised the first major controversy.

"It's time we started planning for the education of our children. They'll be ready for formal instruction soon, and we ought to have complete agreement on what they're going to be taught, and how, and who's going to be responsible," he said.

Ross replied, "That was all settled before we left. The Chaneys were to be in charge. When they died, I didn't bother to appoint a replacement. You have all their material, don't you, Mac?"

"I do. I've been studying it pretty closely."

Singer uncranked his long gaunt frame and rose to speak. "If there are no objections, I nominate Mac for our director of education."

Voices were raised in support. McClendon waited until all were silent, then said, "I'll take the job if you want me to. I'd like very much to do it, but first I think it's important to let everyone know how I feel. I've been giving this a lot of thought, and some of you may disagree with my position." He paused, looked around at the expectant faces, and then went on, "To put it bluntly, I don't want the crimes of mankind dumped on our kids' shoulders. We owe it to them to teach them everything we can that will help them survive and prosper here on New Earth, but

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I don't believe we have the right to chain them to five thousand years of human history. Our history ended when we left Earth. Theirs is just beginning. Let's allow them to find out what they can be, not tell them what they are."

"Are you saying that you wouldn't have our descendants learn anything about Earth?" Ross asked incredulously.

"That's what I'm saying."

An uproar arose from the seated villagers. Ross rapped for order, and when they were silent, he continued. "I don't understand this, Mac. We may be all that's left of mankind. We've conquered space, we've conquered this planet, and you'd have our descendants grow up believing. . .what? What would you have them believe, Mac? That the human race started here, a generation ago?"

"I'll try to answer that point by point, Commander. First of all, we never conquered space. We lucked out, that's all. And we didn't conquer this planet, either. How can you talk of conquering something that doesn't resist, that actually helps you every step of the way? We can grow enough food to feed ten times our present population with no effort at all. The climate is perfect. And it's healthy here. Don't any of you listen to the medical reports? We've been here over five years, and Singer hasn't reported one illness. Not one single case of infectious disease in all that time! The kids don't have the usual childhood sicknesses. We don't even have poisonous insects on this planet!"

Olsen broke in, "What has all this got to do with concealing the past from our children?"

"Everything. We always refer to ourselves as pioneers and colonists. The truth of the matter is that we're refugees. The human race was given one planet, and they destroyed it. We all know what we left behind, and I've heard damned little nostalgic talk since we landed. We're fugitives from a dying planet. Four fifths of the inhabitants of Earth had been killed in a war nobody wanted, and the rest were just waiting for the radiation to reach them—if they didn't starve first, or blow each other up in another crazy war. The *Seeker* series was a last-ditch effort to salvage something from a botched civilization. And we made it. We were given the chance to begin again, a fresh start, and I want it to be just that. I say teach the kids nothing about Earth. Maybe one day they'll be ready to learn it for themselves, and the full records from the ship will be waiting for them, but until then, let's allow them their

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innocence." McClendon looked around the assembled colonists, from face to face, pleading with each one for their children's future. There was a momentary silence when he seated himself.

"What innocence?" Ross said. "That's deception you're talking about. Obscurantism."

The meeting grew loud and disorderly. Again, Ross managed to quiet those present, and the debate on McClendon's proposal went on late into the night. The meeting disbanded with the question unresolved, and the villagers returned to their homes in noisy groups, still deliberating.

"You started something tonight, Mac," Singer said as the two couples walked to their neighboring cottages. "I've never seen a meeting so divided."

"And so angry," Anna Singer added. "It's as though you touched a raw nerve."

McClendon shrugged. "I didn't want it to happen this way, but I had to bring up the issue. I've been reading the material the Chaneys had, and frankly, it scared me. If we follow the original plan, we're going to make this planet another Earth. I can't help thinking of what happened on the one we left."

"Don't you believe the kids have a right to know the history of their race?" Singer asked.

"I believe they have a right not to know it, to be free of it," McClendon said. "We've got a close group here, Dave, and for more than five years we've gotten along like a family. What's going to happen to our closeness when Carver's kids learn that my ancestors made slaves of their ancestors? And what about Sarah, and young David—do you want them to know about the ghettos, and the pogroms, and the holocaust? Will that bring us together, or will it tear us apart?"

"I don't know. I never thought about it," Singer said.

"Neither did I, until a few days ago. It hit me all of a sudden: our kids are *different.*"

"How, Mac?"

"I was watching Adam and David playing. They were building something, I don't know what, but they were building, making, not destroying. The other kids are the same way. Now, I always believed that children were naturally competitive and aggressive, but that's not the way the kids in this settlement are. You study them for a few days and you'll see what I mean."

"You know, that's right," Anna Singer said, as if surprised at the thought. "I can't remember seeing any of the children quarreling or fighting."

"They don't. They share

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things. They cooperate," Betty McClendon said.

"Maybe it's because their parents have always had to cooperate."

"I think that's it, Dave," McClendon said. "The only world they know is a harmonious one. To them, it's natural to get along with one another. Do you think we have a right to tell them that it isn't?" None of the others ventured a reply, and McClendon went on. "When I was Adam's age, I was playing war. I couldn't wait until I was old enough for the real thing, and I was actually angry when I was pulled out of combat and assigned to the *Seeker* project. I felt as if I were running away, letting my family down. My father fought in Indo-China in the sixties, and my grandfather was killed in the Bulge in forty-five. McClendons fought in France in nineteen eighteen, in Cuba in ninety-eight, on both sides in the Civil War. Adam is the first male in my family within memory who has a chance to live out his life without having to kill, and I see no reason why he shouldn't have that chance. He's got food, and plenty of land. There's no oppression here, no aggressors. But if we tell him that he's an Earthman, and Earthmen have been killing one another since the dawn of history, maybe we'll just turn him and all the rest of the kids into another generation of killers."

"I don't want David to have to fight," Anna said.

"No. If we could end it here, now. . ." Singer stopped and turned to McClendon. "Do you think Ross can be convinced?"

"I doubt it. I think he'll go by the charter."

"The charter was drawn up carefully, Mac," Singer said, an edge of uncertainty in his voice. "It might not be as bad as you think, to follow it in a general way. We could make adaptations wherever it seemed wise."

"No, we couldn't," McClendon said firmly. "It's the whole mentality, Dave, the whole complex of assumptions. The charter was written on Earth, and we're not on Earth any more. It was designed to help create a new Earth, and if we follow it, the kids will learn divisiveness, distrust, all the things we've managed to avoid so far."

Betty McClendon looked up at her husband. "We've avoided them until tonight, but aren't we falling into them over this very question?"

"We don't have to. We'll settle it by vote."

"Suppose the vote is the other way? Will you go along with the majority, feeling as you do? *Could* you go along?" Singer asked.

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"We've thought about that," Betty said. "We've talked it over, and we're agreed."

The Singers looked at her expectantly, then at her husband. McClendon put his arm around his wife's shoulders and said to the Singers, "There's room for another colony on this planet. I'm not talking about secession, or revolution, or sneaking off during the night. Article VI of the charter specifically directs us to establish settlements—not just one base, but a number of them, as soon as we feel capable. We can't all stay here forever, and if we come to a fundamental disagreement, maybe that's the time to separate."

"That saves face all around, and it's in keeping with the charter," Betty pointed out.

"That's true. It's the perfect solution. What do you think, dear?" Anna asked.

"Sounds good to me. I'd like to think it over."

"Do that, Dave," McClendon said as they parted. "We'd like to have you two with us in the new colony."

David Singer thought about it. He sat up late into the night, remembering things he had tried hard to forget, things he had hoped to leave behind him forever on Earth. His people, too, had been victims of war, but not in the way McClendon's had. Two generations had died together in Hitler's camps. His father, brought safely to America while still a boy, had vowed that such a thing would never befall his people again, and he had traveled halfway across the world to fight for his vow. He died and left a young son to be raised by a lonely bitter woman. Singer thought of his mother, remembering those few outbursts he had witnessed and how they had driven him to devote his own career to the preservation of life. He sat late before the fire, deep in reflection, and when he went to bed he had reached a decision.

The meeting resumed the next evening. After long and heated debate, the question of the settlement's educational policy was brought to a vote. Despite McClendon's arguments and Singer's impassioned plea, the McClendon faction lost, twenty votes to fourteen.

"That settles it," Ross said when the vote was counted and recorded. Turning to McClendon, he said, "I guess you won't want to be in charge of the program under these circumstances, Mac."

"No, I won't. I'd like to make a request under Article VI of the charter, Commander."

"I thought you might. I can't consider any such request at this time. The settlement can't spare anyone."

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McClendon began, "The charter specifically states—"

"I interpret the charter," Ross broke in. "We aren't ready to start another settlement on this planet. We may not be ready for another ten years, not until some of the youngsters are grown enough to do a man's work."

"In ten years it may be too late."

"I don't think so. Now is too soon, though, and there's no point in debating it. The issue is closed."

McClendon, his face expressionless, left the council hall alone. Ross named Olsen to direct the education program, and no one objected. McClendon's supporters knew that their cause was lost.

The next morning, McClendon and Olsen reported to Ross to arrange the transfer of educational materials and begin Olsen's briefing for his new position. McClendon made a final desperate plea for permission to separate from the complex under Article VI, and again Ross refused.

"I'm sorry, Mac," he said. "I know you feel strongly about this, and I don't like to act the dictator, but you're needed here."

Olsen said, "It was a fair vote, Mac. You had a chance to present your side, and you were outvoted. You would have expected us to go along if you had won, wouldn't you?"

McClendon threw up his hands. "I guess I'm a pretty poor advocate. I just can't make you see how important it is to give our kids freedom from all our mistakes."

"You didn't feel that way a few years ago, when you quoted something to me about those who don't learn from history being forced to repeat it," Ross pointed out. "You didn't feel that way at all."

"I guess I didn't. But I can quote you the old joke about telling kids not to put beans in their ears, too. That seems more to the point right now."

"Look, Mac, it's all settled. Let's not waste time in post-mortems. I'd like to get Chaney's material and start to work. I've got a lot to do," Olsen said impatiently.

They left Ross' quarters and started across the open square in the center of the complex. The little settlement was unusually quiet, and Ross commented on the fact. As they reached the foot of the low rise on which McClendon's house stood, they were jolted by an explosion and a sudden ball of flame as McClendon's house burst asunder. McClendon ran forward, shouting for his wife and children. A blast of heat stopped him fifty feet from the house. He staggered

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back, arms shielding his face, and stood helplessly watching the flames roar upward.

A hand grabbed his shoulder and spun him around roughly. "You did this to sabotage the whole program," Olsen said, drawing his pistol.

"Sabotage. . .? My wife and kids are in there, Olsen!"

"Don't give me that. You got them out, you and Singer and the rest. You're just waiting for your chance to sneak off."

Ross intervened. His voice was calm, but the expression in his eyes was cold and hard. "Easy, Olsen. Keep him covered. We'll get the fire under control and then do some investigating."

The flimsy building burned quickly. McClendon, too stunned to speak, stood meekly and watched the flames rise and sink to embers. When they were able to enter, Ross and the fire-fighting detail went through the smoking ruin, probing and searching. Ross returned to McClendon and Olsen, holding a twisted metal fragment in his hand. He held it out to them.

"Careless job. Didn't you expect us to look, Mac?"

"I didn't . . . Where's Betty? Where are the kids?"

"The house was empty," Ross said contemptuously. "All of Chaney's materials are destroyed. We'll have to put you away for a while, Mac."

"We ought to take care of him right here and now. He destroyed the materials because we wouldn't put our kids in his hands. He could've burned down the whole village," Olsen said.

"We'll find out a few things, and then have a trial, Olsen." Ross gathered the others around him in the square. "I want you to round up Singer, Carver, Keneshaw, and everyone else who voted with McClendon last night. Disarm them and bring them to my quarters right away." He turned to McClendon. "Your friends are conspicuous by their absence, Mac. Where are they hiding?"

"Go to hell."

"We'll get them anyway."

Singer's voice cut sharply into the square. "Stand right there, all of you. Drop the gun, Olsen." Singer emerged from the shadow of a building, a laser in each hand. Ross looked around and saw others, also armed, encircling his group.

"This is mutiny, Singer," he said.

"Call it what you like. We're acting under Article VI. Don't try to stop us."

"McClendon's an enemy of the settlement!" Olsen cried.

"McClendon had nothing to do with the explosion. Let him go, *now*," Singer said. "Come on, Mac, let's move out."

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McClendon shook off Olsen's grip and took a step forward. The two groups stood as if frozen, then one of the men beside Ross drew and fired at Singer. Singer dodged and returned the fire, and at once all weapons were in action. Olsen dove for his weapon and went down with the neat smoking hole of a laser beam drilled through his skull from temple to temple. McClendon snatched up his pistol and started for cover. Ross dropped him with two shots in the back, and then went down himself as a laser seared through his belly. Amid the heavy crossfire, Carver threw down his automatic rifle and ran to McClendon's aid. He lifted the gory body over his broad shoulder and started to carry it to cover. He was cut down by a burst of fire. In a momentary lull, Singer dropped his weapons and ran into the square, where he threw up his empty hands and screamed frantically, "Stop! We're going to wipe ourselves out! For God's sake—"

A grenade exploded at his feet, flinging bloody fragments skyward. The firing intensified, as if in rage and desperation the villagers sought their own Armageddon. Screams and gunfure, the hiss of lasers and the cries of the dying were drowned out by a succession of explosions as grenades and heavier weapons were brought into use.

After the last explosion came no sound save the muted crackling of fire. Hours later, in the smoke that drifted upward from the silent ruins, there arose the faint sound of a child crying. Somewhere in the wreckage a voice called out weakly, and a pained moaning responded to the lonely wail. On the next day, only the child could be heard.

The day after that, there was no sound at all.

## V

In the darkness at the edge of the clearing, where the foliage of the thick, squat trees cast a deep shadow, the creatures were massing their forces. Distance, darkness, and the swiftness of the aliens' movements made it difficult to estimate their number with any accuracy, but Ross was certain of more than a hundred.

"A hundred, maybe as many as a hundred and twenty, against sixteen of us," he said, handing the binoculars to McClendon. "Keep an eye on them. Sing out if they start to move on us."

"Right. How's the arm?"

"Still can't use it. I'm giving the order, no close combat with those double-jointed monstrosities."

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"No one wants it. Trouble is, they're so fast that if you miss your first shot, you've got close combat whether you want it or not."

"Then don't miss the first shot," Ross said.

McClendon went on, as if he had not heard. "I still can't figure out why they turned on us so abruptly. They've been friendly ever since we first encountered them."

"They *seemed* friendly, Mac. We were too trusting. They killed half the settlement in their first raid."

"But why? Could a whole race go mad overnight? Did we violate some law of theirs?"

"Not much point in worrying over it. We're at war now, whatever the cause may be. Keep watch while I check the defenses," Ross said.

He ducked low, clutching his injured arm close to his side, and in a crouching run made his way to the main barricade. Eight men and women were in position. Automatic rifles were set in place, grenades stacked in easy reach, and a loaded pistol was in each holster.

"All ready here?" Ross asked.

"Ready whenever they are," Keneshaw replied.

"They're getting ready to attack, about a hundred of them, maybe a lot more. This time we'll be ready. If we can beat them back, we can break free."

"Where will we run?" one of the women asked.

"Inland, to the hills. We'll find a place where they can't follow," Ross said.

Keneshaw asked, "How can we know that? We don't even know why they turned against us. Maybe they believe they're in some kind of holy war, and they have to wipe us out."

"If we cripple their fighting force, they won't be able to do anything to us," Ross said. "Let's concentrate on that."

"But if we could arrange a parley with them, maybe we could avoid—"

"Chaney and Singer were the only ones who knew their language well enough, and they're dead."

"McClendon knows it," Keneshaw pointed out.

"I can't risk him," Ross said flatly, terminating the discussion. He moved to the other two posts and then returned to McClendon. The aliens' position was unchanged.

"I think they're hesitant about attacking. I'd like to try to talk to them," McClendon said.

"Keneshaw just made the same suggestion, and I turned it down. You're the second-in-command here, Mac. Besides, I can't risk the loss of one fighting man."

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"One man more or less won't make much difference against their numbers. Peace is worth the risk. Maybe this whole trouble is the result of a misunderstanding, some taboo we violated without even knowing it. Let me talk to them."

Ross reflected a moment, then said, "All right. Find out why they attacked and what they want. Stay within range of our weapons, so we can cover you. If it starts to look bad, get back here on the run."

Ross advised the other defenders of McClendon's mission, then returned to him. McClendon removed his weapons, slipped over the dirt parapet, and walked slowly into the clearing. He kept his hands above his heads, palms out, first two fingertips touching in the aliens' peace gesture.

Soon two aliens emerged from the shadows and approached him, their hands raised in the same gesture. They were taller than the human, long-limbed and very slender, with a greenish cast to their shiny skin that reminded the Earthmen of some reptilian form imitating human behavior. The three figures came together and touched fingertips, then the aliens squatted down, their bodies slanting forward, while McClendon sank back on his heels.

They talked for several minutes in the high chittering speech of the aliens, gesturing broadly to cover gaps in their mutual comprehension. Suddenly a human voice rang out across the clearing. McClendon turned and saw Ross standing atop the parapet, brandishing his pistol in his good hand and shouting, "Run, Mac! They're moving up on the sides! It's a trap!"

McClendon waved his arms frantically and shouted back, "No, don't open fire! They want peace!"

Even as he spoke, the alien on his right was hit with a burst from Ross' hand laser that sent him sprawling dead on the ground. McClendon turned to the other, motioning to him to lie flat for his own safety, but instead the alien drew his long blade and lunged for McClendon.

Too late to save McClendon, Ross steadied his aim on the fleeing alien and dropped him with a clean shot. The other defenders were already firing at the figures moving nimbly and swiftly over the clearing, somehow finding cover on the bare, flat ground.

Ross crouched by Keneshaw's side, reloading. "I took them both, but the big one got Mac," he said.

"Why did you shoot?"

"Those treacherous lizards

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were trying to sneak up on both sides of us while two of them talked to Mac. I saw them out there, Keneshaw."

"I didn't see anything."

"You weren't looking in the right place. Or do you think I'm lying?" Ross said.

Before Keneshaw could reply, the first wave of aliens reached the barricade. They were held. They wavered, and several of them fell back just as the second wave attacked, and simultaneous assaults launched against the other, less strongly defended positions, brought the aliens inside the encampment. In the close quarters, their agility and numbers more than compensated for the colonists' superior weaponry. The Earthmen held their fire for fear of hitting their own people; the aliens used their long swords to hack down the colonists one by one.

The battle was short and furious. Twenty-eight of the aliens lay dead or mortally injured. Not one colonist survived the assault. The aliens left them lying face upward, unburied, as a sign of their treachery, and then returned to their own village to bury the dead.

## VI

When the twelve survivors had unloaded the lifeship and eaten their first meal on the new planet, McClendon read off the damage report. The facts were sobering. In the anxious silence that followed, he turned his attention to their new home, and his voice became more cheerful.

"Doc Singer has made a cursory investigation of this place. I'd like you to hear what he has to say."

Singer rose and took his place beside McClendon. "The air and water are absolutely pure. The soil is incredibly fertile. The fruit on these trees is a nutritionist's dream. We could live off any one of these for an indefinite period, and thrive on it."

"But we're unarmed. We've lost all our power sources," a voice said.

"There's no evidence of human life, no sign of predators. We can devise power sources on our own," McClendon said.

"What about climate?" someone asked Singer.

"Judging from the vegetation, I'd say semitropical with a temperature range from about sixty to ninety degrees Fahrenheit. We may be a bit warm, but we won't have to worry about freezing to death. Another thing—these trees look like good building material and clean fuel. And look at this," Singer said, unfolding a piece of

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soft, smooth brown cloth he had held draped over his arm. He displayed it to the group, and then passed it to McClendon. "What do you think of it, Mac?"

"Like a high-grade wool, but very strong. Where did it come from?"

"It's tree bark. And if you're careful, you can strip off blanket-sized pieces without any damage to the tree that I can determine."

Carver stood and stretched his arms wide. A grin broke across his brown face. "All right, we're in Paradise. What now?"

"We ought to try to find out about the others," Betty McClendon said.

"If they got clear of the *Seeker*, their lifeships homed in on this system just as ours did."

"That's a big if, Mac. Whatever hit us broke the ship apart," Carver said.

"We survived, didn't we? If it hit forward, the lifeships all could have escaped."

"How can we find out?" Betty asked.

McClendon shrugged and spread his hands helplessly. "We're grounded for good, now. There's no point in trying to search for the Ross and Olsen groups on foot. We'll have to wait for them to find us. In the meantime, we have plenty to do. This is our home from now on, and it's a good one. We can make it."

They slept under the unfamiliar stars that night and the next, and on the third day they came to a range of low hills beyond which lay a peninsula that thrust far out into a calm sea. They made this peninsula their temporary home. Food and water were abundant, shelters were easily constructed, and life in the mild climate was idyllic. Talk of moving to the interior grew less frequent and eventually was abandoned altogether.

As time passed, other early imperatives were forgotten. The colonists became a seafaring people. By the time the third generation reached maturity, the colony's small, swift, sailing ships had touched the coasts of all the major continents and explored the interior of most of them without finding any trace of either intelligent planetary life or other Earth survivors.

During this period, a calamity befell the colony and changed forever the ways of the people. A small fleet of ships under the command of David II McClendon was detained away from home port by a furious three-day storm. Upon their return, the seafarers found the peninsula a scoured wreck of stone and uprooted trees, stripped and leveled and barren of life. A tidal wave had swept

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across the peninsula and carried the settlement and all the inhabitants before it. The last Earth-born colonists were gone, and so were their children. Only the twenty-four young men and women from the sea remained, returned to a home that no longer existed.

They mourned their dead, took counsel together, and after much debate and long deliberation they smashed their boats and turned from the sea to seek a new home inland. It was hard traveling for those unaccustomed to land voyages, but despite all their difficulties, they encountered no danger. After long travel, they came to a high valley where the soil was rich, the water plentiful, and the fruit trees abundant. Here they chose to settle, and for the second time, life on the planet began anew.

The high valley seemed as benevolent as the peninsula had been, and the colony thrived with scarcely any effort, for very little was needed. Their number grew rapidly, until a strange disease suddenly appeared among them. Its onset was swift, its course painless, and in nearly all cases, it was fatal. The colony ceased to grow. Its number began to dwindle, and the search for a cure was futile. They had long ago forgotten their medical lore in three generations untouched by disease. Many of the elder colonists had already died when the Senji came.

The Senji were a small, soft-voiced, golden-pelted race, the only intelligent beings native to the planet. They had been aware of the Earth pioneers almost from the time of their arrival, but had not made themselves known any earlier because, as they explained, the newcomers had had no need of them until now. Needed at last, they came in peace, bearing gifts, and offered their aid and friendship. Their first assistance was medical; they plucked the leaves of a low-growing herb with a bitter smell, crushed them in water, and urged it upon the colonists. The plague began to abate at once, and all traces of it were gone within a few days. The Senji taught the colonists the uses of other medicinal plants and showed them how to cultivate the wheat-like *bilim* plant, as well as offering instruction in other farming techniques that the newcomers had long forgotten. The Senji worked hard and stayed long among the villagers, and when the time for their departure came, they asked in return only to be left to their ways. The request was honored. The humans and the Senji lived apart, but their relations were harmonious.

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All the colony's records had been swept to oblivion by the tidal wave. With the facts gone, only memories remained; and with the passing of time in the high valley, the plague, the teachings of the Senji and the rediscovery of the soil, the old memories were slowly buried under successive layers of new memory that endured and persisted, inevitable, inexorable, and yet ever-gentle and comforting. The colonists attuned their lives to the regular slow turn of the seasons; they became one with sun, soil, and rain, and a deep reverence for all life grew up among them. Their very language, slow and mellifluous, was rich in terms drawn from this basic belief.

As years grew into generations and generations became centuries, the memory of the expedition passed from history into legend, and in time, into myth. Tales were told of the Seekers, beings of awesome power who could leap from star to star. It was these very Seekers who had gathered the forgotten children of a once-mighty race, the men of Earth, and caused them to be reborn in the high valley. Other Earth children had sought to follow but had lost their way, and now they wandered the black spaces overhead, seeking reunion with their brothers. So the people of the high valley believed.

After five centuries the myths had passed beyond doubt and rooted themselves in ritual and ceremony, and the coming of the men of Ros to the high valley was a shock of revelation. They stumbled out of the surrounding forest one day, gaunt and haggard, three men whose flesh was as tattered as their strange garments, and who croaked out a plea for help in a language unknown to the people but vaguely similar to their own tongue. The strangers' speech was rapid and somewhat higher pitched than the villagers', but a word here, a phrase there, a pattern of inflection or an intonation, suggested a common source.

The settlers took the Rosmen in and nursed them back to health. Until communication was established, speculation was rampant. Some believed that these men were fallen Seekers, others that they were lost children of Earth. All were awed by them, and the wonder did not lessen when, even after a common language was devised, the origin of the Rosmen remained vague and contradictory.

Their health restored, the Rosmen left with the promise to return. At the end of the planting season they fulfilled their promise. This time they numbered twelve, and they made an encampment outside

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the village, where they lived in their own way. They celebrated strange and bloody rituals, slaying living creatures, burning them over a fire, and eating the remains. The villagers, to whom all life was sacred, were horrified at these deeds but remained silent in obedience to the precept of hospitality. The Rosmen stayed long this time and asked many questions. They seemed to be greatly concerned about the Senji. It was observed by several of the villagers that the Senji had not been seen or heard from since the arrival of the first Rosmen. The people thought this unusual, but could not determine the reason for the Senji's absence.

When they terminated their second visit, the Rosmen left a question with the elder. The response was to be given when they returned at the end of the next planting season.

When the appointed time came, the men of Ros marched to the dwelling of the M'Klan-din, the elder of the mountain people, to hear his decision. They walked with a steady rhythmic stride through the broad village streets, a troop of forty tall muscular men with expressionless faces, all of them wearing tight-fitting leather uniforms, with long weapons slung over their shoulders and sidearms by their waists. Within his dwelling, the M'Klan-din sat serene, but his advisors were troubled. He allowed all to speak before he gave reply.

"We agree that these men are the lost brothers of legend, our own flesh and blood, separated from us centuries ago at the time of arrival," he said. "Therefore, by our own precepts, we must welcome them."

"But they take life," the Bilim Mother persisted. "They kill living beings for food. This is against the first and greatest precept."

"They are unaware of the precepts. Perhaps their ways do not forbid such doings," the M'Klan-din said.

"Then their ways are evil, brothers or not."

"The Rosmen have been our guests twice before and done us no harm. They have given us good advice in some matters. Why should we suddenly fear them?" the M'Klan-din asked.

"This time they come in strength, bearing weapons," an old man said. "They know we mean them no harm, but they come to us armed, and they speak of great danger. What danger is there for us, except what they bring?"

The M'Klan-din reassured them. "The Rosmen travel a long way to see us, through dense forest. It is a hard journey, and since they do not know living things and their ways as we do, they consider it

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dangerous. The weapons give them a feeling of safety. This is why they carry them, not as a threat to us. If we disapprove of their ways, it is for us to teach them the precepts. Perhaps this is why the Rosmen have come."

The sound of marching feet came from the distance, growing steadily louder. The M'Klan-din arose and gathered his robes about him.

"They have asked to speak with us. Let us greet them without fear or suspicion in our voices," he said. The others looked at one another, but did not speak. The elder walked to the entry and took his place in the shaded pavilion, his advisors at his side.

The Rosmen halted before the pavilion and positioned themselves back to back in two ranks, one facing the elder, the other facing the village street. Their leader stepped forward, returned the M'Klan-din's gesture of greeting peremptorily, and said, "Do you have answer for me?"

"Your people are welcome to live among us as our honored guests for as long as it pleases you to stay."

"Not what was asked. Not requesting hospitality. We require cooperation. Will your people agree to build wall and fortifications?" the leader of the Rosmen asked in his staccato speech.

"We cannot perceive a need for such things in the light of the precepts, and it is therefore impossible for us to consider acting further upon your request," the M'Klan-din said. He extended his hands. "Stay with us, and we will talk of it. Perhaps when we have opened our minds to one another—"

"Was not sent to debate," the Rosmen's leader broke in. "Work is for your own good, elder. Against all probabilities that you have survived so long without defenses, but probabilities will be realized. Must help you protect yourselves."

"We need no protection, and we desire none. This is our home, and we are safe."

"You think so, we know better. Our settlement has been besieged by old inhabitants. Probability we would have been overrun and wiped out by Senji if not for fortifications."

The M'Klan-din looked puzzled. "Your people spoke of this before. I did not understand then, and I do not understand now. The old inhabitants have always been our friends. There is no hostility between us. They delivered our fathers from plague and hunger and helped them to build this very village, long ago."

"Senji attacked Ros Complex in force just before our departure. Were not friendly

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then, elder," the Rosman said.

"Perhaps it is you who were not friendly."

"Not policy to befriend beasts," the Rosman said coldly.

"The Senji are human."

"You say human? Senji smelly animals with dirty pelts. Live out in open, like animals."

"The legends say that our forefathers lived in the open for a time after arrival. The Senji showed them how to build dwellings."

The Rosman waved this information off with an impatient gesture. "Your legend, not ours. Not here to discuss legends. Imperative this village be fortified as base against Senji. With it, Ros can make planet safe for men. Your people will benefit, are expected to help with work. Help us willingly and no trouble."

"We will not help you to build walls," the M'Klan-din said.

"You will help us. We will enforce."

"No, you will not," the old man said, holding out his arms to still his advisors and stepping forward to confront the leader of the Rosmen eye to eye. "The precepts by which we live forbid us to build barriers between living things. When a man builds a wall, he creates an enemy. This is our belief. He creates the enemy within himself," he said, touching his breast, "and once the enemy is created, he must be killed. There is no other way. When we kill an enemy outside us, we are killing something within us that can never be restored. And so we will not kill."

"Those not willing to kill must be prepared to die sooner than their neighbors," the Rosman said.

The M'Klan-din spread his hands and smiled. "All men die at their appointed time. They have no choice. But we can choose to die without blood on our hands."

The leader of the Rosmen stepped back, studied the old man standing erect and unyielding before him, and then looked at the advisors. "Elder is old and does not care," he said to them. "What about you? Do you want to survive?"

"We do not kill," the Bilim Mother said. Others repeated her words.

"Do you say none of your people has ever killed?"

The M'Klan-din shook his white locks slowly and sadly. "We cannot claim that. We have had men among us who broke the precepts. But they repented their evil deeds."

"You say evil. Sometimes is necessary to kill."

"Why?" the M'Klan-din asked mildly, as if speaking to a child.

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"In order to survive."

"Survival results from the giving of life, not the taking of it. If killing is the price of survival, then death begets life. This is madness to say."

"You are weaklings. You are not fit to survive or to lead your people," the Rosman said. They made no reply. He glared from one calm, resolute face to another, then turned and strode into the street. The assembled villagers drew back slightly and watched him.

"Listen to me," he addressed them. "Your wise men tell me all village people afraid to kill, but I know better. You are men, will defend homes and families."

They looked at him curiously, as if his words had no meaning. No one replied. He searched among them, and his eyes lit on a young man who stood beside a woman and held a small child by the hand. "You," the Rosman said. "What if Senji attacked and threatened child? What would you do?"

The young man looked at him, puzzled, and smiled. "The Senji are our friends," he said.

"The Senji would not attack us. They only visit us in peace," the woman added.

"Senji are murdering animals," the Rosman said.

The young man shook his head. "This is not so," he said, and many around him repeated the words. They spoke without any trace of hostility and offered no show of belligerence, merely corrected the Rosman's obvious error.

"Very well. Forget about Senji," the leader said, drawing his pistol. At his signal, the troops unslung their weapons and held them in readiness. Still the villagers offered no show of resistance. "Will make this clear, so you will understand," the leader said, taking the child's hand and pulling it away from the young man. He placed his weapon against the child's head. "Now, you. Assume that I kill child here, before your eyes. What do you do?"

"I would sorrow for the child and for you."

"You would try to kill me! Say it, you would try to kill me!" the leader shouted.

"I do not kill," the young man said. "The First Precept is to respect all life; I obey it."

"Then maybe you all die!"

"Certainly we will all die. That is no reason to kill," the young man said calmly.

The Rosman stood poised with his pistol against the child's head. His men trained their weapons on the villagers, who stood without fear, looking on the incomprehensible antics of the strangers. All was still with a stillness beyond the natural order.

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Suddenly, the air around the villagers seemed to come alive and shimmer with a brilliant light. The figures of the Rosmen faded into nothingness, and a great rush of wind swept through the settlement, disturbing nothing, lifting not a single mote of dust from the ground, but filling the villagers' spirits with exultant music. Intoxicating sweetness flowed into them with every breath they drew. Shining figures took shape before their eyes and moved to embrace them with open arms, their faces radiant with joy. The sky was filled with brightness.

"*Welcome, men of Earth!*" arose all around them in a chorus of voices, ecstatic and surpassingly beautiful. "*You have found the way! Arise now, and come with us, and go to join your brothers among the stars!*"

## VII

The last phase of the outbound program was completed. The commander of *Seeker III* rose from his place at the control panel and started for the midsection of the ship, where the cryotanks awaited. With the first officer close behind him, he swung into the chamber where the oversized translucent eggs hung, the man-made wombs in which the stellar pioneers were to pass the next two centuries.

"Final check of the tanks, Dave," he said.

"Right, Mac."

Singer awaited the commander's first reading. When no word came, he looked up and saw McClendon gazing abstractedly ahead of him, a quiet smile on his face. At the same moment, Singer felt suffused with a sensation of triumph.

McClendon broke the silence. "Dave, don't laugh at me, please," he said, "but I just had. . .I don't know. . ."

"So did I, Mac! Almost like a. . .a vision!"

"We're going to make it, Dave. We can't miss! It's almost as though we've been tested somehow, without even knowing it, and we've passed."

McClendon looked around and overhead at the fourteen cryotanks in the chamber. His wife slept now, and Anna Singer; the Carvers, the Keneshaws, the Jacksons, the Hunsingers, and the Cervenkas all slept, awaiting the dawn of arrival. And that dawn would come, McClendon knew it now without a doubt. They were a good crew, he thought; just the right crew for a voyage like this. Someone had selected them wisely.

"Let's finish the check, Dave, and get into our tanks," McClendon said, grinning at his first officer. "I can't wait to wake up tomorrow morning."

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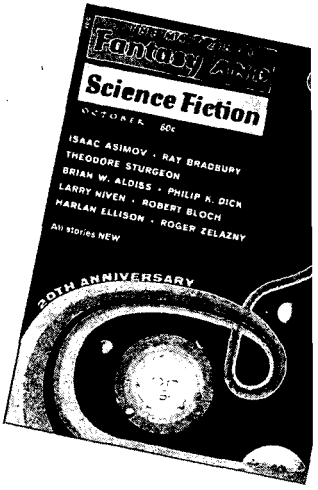


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